Love Stories of the Real West

RANCH ROMANCES

15¢

The Tinsel and the Glory

BY WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

SECOND APRIL NUMBER

Beginning
a new serial by
CORCORAN AND COREY

When a COLD threatens to run through a family...

It's LISTERINE ANTISEPTIC *Quick*— FOR EVERYBODY!

IT'S all too easy for a cold, once it starts, to spread from one member of the family to another . . . with troublesome results. That's why it's so sensible to enlist the aid of the Listerine Antiseptic gargle *early* and *often!*

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TESTS SHOWED LISTERINE ANTISEPTIC REDUCED GERMS UP TO 96.7%

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RANCH ROMANCES

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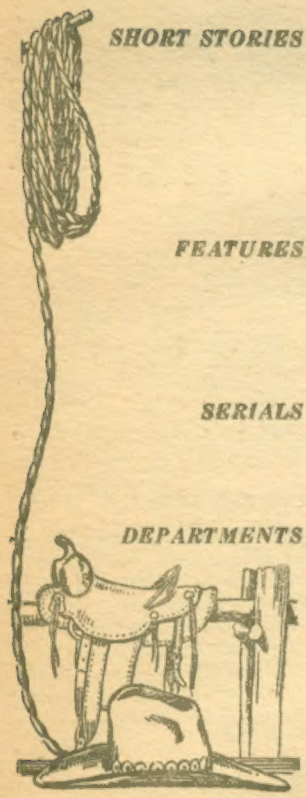

FANNY ELLSWORTH, Editor

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TRAIL DUST

THIS DEPARTMENT will endeavor to cut sign on some of the colorful happenings of today's West and haze the stuff along to you—twentieth century trail dust, stirred up by folks in the cow country.

TWENTY masked raiders on a midnight foray ruined some of his property and assaulted the person of a nester in North Dakota. When it was over and he, still alive, was asked by the law to sign complaints and take action, he made one of the most remarkable statements the West has ever heard, and maybe the most beautiful. "No," he said. "I will not. They are my neighbors."

DOWN in Harlingen, Texas, a bank robber got 32 cents for his trouble. His trouble was that he got caught. And speaking of money, a woman in Montana paid her half-yearly property tax. It was 17 cents. She said the next half-year would be easier; she would owe 16 cents. The property is unimproved land.

TWO fascinating advertisements have appeared in Western papers recently. One is an unconscious comment on the meat shortage: "For the best in Sea Food, The Steak House, East of Flagstaff." The other seems far more ominous. It appeared in the Boulder City *Daily News* and read, simply: "Civilization. While it lasts. 79 cents. Campbell Electric Co." We hope they sell a lot of it. The price seems reasonable.

THE WEST has a hitching-post that, geologists say, is 120,000,000 years old. It is a petrified tree trunk, five feet in diameter and 12 feet high. Early-day cowboys tied up to it when it was a landmark by an old roundup corral. This area, some hundred miles west of Wyoming's Devil Tower, has millions of tons of petrified wood, a lot of which is still standing erect.

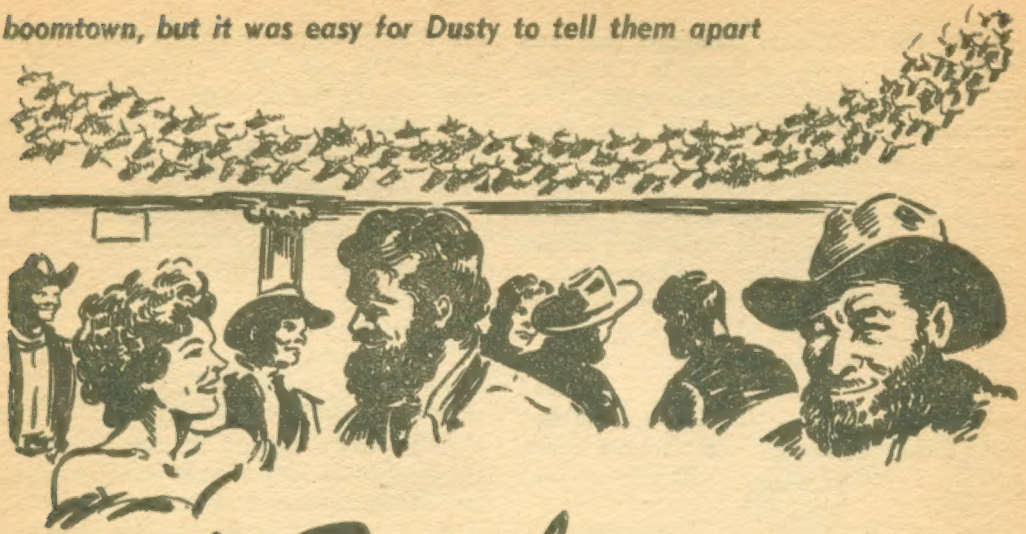
FOURTEEN HUNDRED miles is a lot of miles, especially when they have to be dug out of the ground and not ridden. That's the length of the irrigation canals that encircle the Valley of the Sun around Phoenix, Ariz., keeping the entire area fresh and green. It's something to think about when the little garden behind the house needs attention.

ZERO weather, rocky ground and strong winds prevented the erection of telegraph poles in Colorado and Utah and Nevada back in 1858 when the first lines were strung through. Undaunted, the pioneers strung the lines to the tops of pine trees. They were called Bee's Grapevine Lines, after Fred Bee, the manager of the telegraph company at Virginia City.

THERE were more sheep and more cattle on the ranges of California this winter than there have been since 1936—270,000 sheep and 228,000 head of cattle, according to the California Dept. of Agriculture.

This was no ordinary percentage girl

BOTH the tinsel and the glory glittered and shone in boomtown, but it was easy for Dusty to tell them apart



The Tinsel and the Glory

By Wayne D. Overholser

DUSTY EAGAN had been footloose, drifting constantly, never using a campsite twice. Restlessness was a family trait that had brought his father across the plains with the westward surge of gold seekers to be buried in an unmarked grave along the Humboldt; it had made an outlaw out of his brother Pete and sent him and Dusty on separate ways. Now the restlessness had died in Dusty. For the first time since he was a kid, he had settled down and dreamed his dreams. But frustration built a smoldering fire in him. There was no compensation for loneliness.

The heat and the dust, the thirst and the hunger were things that Dusty could stand, things he had known most of his life. Physical needs could be met in the cool shade of a cottonwood along the Dolores, a bath in a deep pool, a drink, a meal of beef or venison. But for a man who has begun to dream those are the minor wants of life. The urgent desire for children and love and the solid feel of being wanted—those were the important things. Nothing could substitute for them.

As he saddled his big roan that early fall morning, he looked down into Cedar Valley, locked between high, red walls. The leaves of the cottonwoods along the river were yellow and falling, the crisp feeling of impending frost thinned the air. He stepped into the saddle and looked back at his cabin, the feeling of frustration giving another twist to his taut nerves. This was his Circle E, a ten-cow outfit hanging on the fringe of the good graze, a sorry place to bring a woman. Nancy Beam would marry him and come here to live, or she would ride away with him, but he wasn't a man who would let her do either.

Dusty put his roan down the trail, curling in switchbacks along the face of the red sandstone cliff that walled the valley; he

passed the huddle of buildings that was Tailholt and rode on towards Crossbow. He had thought about this a long time. For weeks his pride had kept him away from old Windy Beam, but there were some needs that whittle a man down. Those needs were pressing him now until he was willing to reach for any straw that drifted by, and this was a straw. Nothing more.

In Cedar Valley a man was with Crossbow or he was outside of everything. Windy Beam had been the first settler, bringing a herd in from Utah years before. He had taken what he wanted of the best, claimed both banks of the Dolores for the entire width of the valley, and built the town of Tailholt.

This was Windy Beam's empire. He permitted only those who bowed and scraped in the manner befitting an emperor's subjects to enjoy the bounty of the country. That was Dusty's trouble. He wasn't one to bow and scrape. The rest of his trouble stemmed from the fact that he and Windy's daughter were in love.

As Dusty turned into Crossbow's ranch yard he was glad he'd talked it over with Nancy. She was waiting for him down the river. It was bad enough for a man to level his pride; it was hell to have the woman he loved see him do it.

Windy Beam was talking to his ramrod, Sim Spain, at the corrals. Three hands were loitering around, waiting for the day's orders. Dusty swore softly. He'd have done better to have waited until later in the day when Windy was alone. He was twice as tough when he had an audience.

It was Spain who saw Dusty first. He said something to Beam. They turned, Spain signaling his men to come closer. Windy Beam never took an opponent lightly, especially a man who had shown the dogged stubbornness that was so much a part of Dusty Eagan.

Reining up, Dusty said, "Morning, gents," and stepped down into the red sand. Beam nodded coldly. The rest gave no sign of recognition.

There was this moment of silence, a sizing-up period that reminded Dusty of one dog standing off half a dozen. Windy Beam was a blocky man, a driving man, unforgiving of those who stood against him. He was bareheaded, his closely cropped hair bristling upright like fine white wire.

"Looks like winter's coming," Dusty said, hand reaching to his shirt pocket for paper and tobacco.

"Does so." Windy never used two words where one would do, a habit that had gained him his name.

"What the hell do you want, Eagan?" Spain challenged.

Waiting was not part of the ramrod's makeup. He was a whip-shaped man, fast with a gun and dirty with his fists, the kind Windy Beam wanted to run his outfit. Dusty sensed a sort of quiet insolence about him that was characteristic of all Crossbow men. Now that insolence made a steady, hostile pressure.

"My business is with your boss," Dusty said coldly.

Dusty turned so that he could watch

DUSTY EAGAN NANCY BEAM

Spain and his men. If it came to a fight—and there was always that chance when a small rancher had the temerity to ride onto Crossbow land—Dusty wasn't sure whether he could take Spain or not. He did know he couldn't take them all.

"Let's have it," Windy said.

Dusty motioned toward the cottonwoods. "With you. Alone."

"You'll say it here."

Dusty sealed his cigarette and slid it into his mouth, feeling Spain's bold, penetrating gaze probing him. He gave Spain his back and looked directly at Beam. "You know Nancy and me are in love. We'll be getting married before long, but it ain't right to take her up there on the mesa the way my place is. I'd like to borrow some money. Kind of fix things up for her."

It took a lot of brass to say it, right out here before Spain who was in love with Nancy himself. It took so much brass that Windy didn't say anything for a moment. He couldn't do any more than breathe, each

intaking and expelling of breath a gusty sigh.

Spain's face had been turned as red by wind and sun as the soil on which they stood. Now it burned with a fiery tint that hinted at the mounting fury in him.

Windy laughed, and the tension was broken. He nodded at Spain. "I like a man with guts, Sim. This boy oughta be on our side."

But Spain didn't laugh. "It ain't guts, boss. He's just a damned fool. There's a cottonwood limb yonder. . . ."

"None of that," Windy said sharply. "Wouldn't make me no never mind, but Nancy would go crazy."

"What does she want with this two-bit cow nurse?" Spain bawled. "He don't make enough off them ten cows he's got in the cedars and piñons on the mesa to keep her in handkerchiefs."

WINDY began filling his pipe. Nancy was his one weakness, and Dusty, watching him, knew the girl had talked to him.

"I reckon that's right, Sim," Windy said finally, "but it's love. No reasoning with it. Got to wait till she gets over it."

"I won't reason with it," Spain raged. "Eagan, if I ever catch you with her, I'll gut-shoot you."

"That so?" Dusty's cold cigarette dangled from one corner of his mouth, sage-grey eyes narrowed. "Make your play, Spain. No call to wait."

It would have exploded into a burst of violence if Windy hadn't swung to face his foreman. "You pull your iron, and you're fired. You hear?"

Temper and ambition fought it out in Sim Spain, and ambition won. He breathed, "All right, boss."

Windy turned back to Dusty. "I admire your courage, son," he said with more kindliness than Dusty expected. "I was in love once, but I didn't get the girl. Just as well, I reckon. Same with you. Don't take too much stock in what Nancy says. She ain't for you." Nodding, he turned again to Spain.

That was it. Windy had taken more words than was his habit to say no, but it was just as final as if it had been an oration. Dusty stepped into the saddle. He thumbed a match to life, held the flame to his cigarette and tossed the stick away. He took a deep drag, aware that Spain was still watching him warily. He said, for no good reason except that a thousand devils were prompting him, "I ain't giving her up."

"You touch her," Spain cried out, "and I'll gut-shoot you. I told you that."

"You sure as hell scare me," Dusty said mildly.

Windy swung around, a tightness coming into his face, temper bringing a hard glint into his eyes. "Use your head, Eagan. Nancy's husband gets Crossbow. Don't think for a minute I'd leave it to an outlaw's brother."

Windy might as well have rammed him in the belly with his fist. Dusty could do something about a lot of things. He couldn't do anything about his brother Pete, and he knew, with a burst of cold insight, that there was a deal of justice in what Windy said. He couldn't be blamed for what Pete had done, but the taint of it was there.

Without a word Dusty wheeled his roan and left in a hard run. He was supposed to meet Nancy, but he couldn't. Not today. Not ever again. Maybe Pete was right. He'd seen him at Moab the summer before.

"Take what you want, Dusty," Pete had said. "Women or money. Don't make no difference. Just take it, and tell everybody else to go to hell."

Now, turning toward Tailholt, Dusty's thoughts were a chill, bitter stream. There was nothing to hold him here. A few cows. A one-room dirt-floored shack. A girl he loved that he couldn't marry. No, it wasn't enough. She'd cry a little for him, maybe, but she'd get over it, and she'd forget him. She'd wind up marrying Sim Spain, she'd make Windy happy, and in the long run she'd be happy. He'd best be riding on.

ON HIS way through Tailholt Dusty stopped at Brandy Bill's Bar, partly because he wanted a drink, but mostly because he saw Al Chase's sorrel racked at the pole. Chase lived in a shack

a mile beyond Dusty's Circle E and was the nearest thing to a neighbor Dusty had.

Chase owned nothing except his horse and gear, his clothes and the two black-butted guns he wore thonged low on his thighs in the manner of a quick-draw man, but he hadn't worked a day since he'd put up his cabin. He hunted and fished or worried the days out under a piñon, hat pulled over his eyes, Winchester always within reach. Chances were he'd laugh when Dusty offered him his Circle-E. Still, a man never knows. It wouldn't hurt to ask.

Chase nodded somberly when Dusty came in, said, "Howdy," and poured a drink. He motioned to Brandy Bill. "Another glass."

"How's things, Al?" Dusty asked.

"Bad. Plumb bad."

The whole world was bad as far as Al Chase went. Dusty always wondered about it, but Chase never gave the slightest clue to what his past had been. Now, in his middle forties, he was a bitter-mouthed man who had no friends in the valley except Dusty. Slender with yellow hair and a ragged, yellow mustache, he wore cowboy duds with the exception of the black derby he cocked over his left ear. He would be, Dusty thought, a good hand in case of showdown trouble.

"I was thinking the same." Dusty brought his gaze to the other, hesitating because he sensed the uselessness of it. Then, deciding there would never be a better time, he said bluntly, "I'm pulling out. Al. How'd you like to have my outfit?"

Chase choked on his drink, spilling part of the liquor before he got the glass back on the bar. "You're throwing 'em too fast, son. What's the idea of pulling out with Nancy thinking about you like she is?"

"Windy doesn't think like Nancy," Dusty said soberly.

"Hell, you don't aim to marry Windy, do you?"

"No, but I'd have him for a pappy-in-law." He told Chase what had happened. Then he pulled a handful of silver out of his pocket. "That's what I'm worth. She's used to everything she wants. It's no good, Al."

"Maybe not now, but it will be." Chase poured another drink and eyed the amber liquor sourly. "Don't slope out and leave her, Dusty. You'll hate yourself the rest of your life. You'll go bad like Pete."

"Might as well."

"Aw, don't be a complete damn fool. Windy ain't thinking 'bout Nancy. He wants her to marry Spain because Spain's a good ramrod. He loves his outfit more'n he does his girl. Spain wants her so he'll get the spread. He'll wreck her life. That's the kind of huckleberry he is. She'll need you, and if you ride off, you'll be wondering all the time." He pinned searching eyes on Dusty. "A man only feels that way 'bout one woman. That the way you feel 'bout Nancy?"

"I feel that way all right," Dusty said with sudden violence, "but I tell you I ain't gonna starve her and make her work her fingers off in a dirt-floored cabin where you have to lug water from the creek. I tell you I'm riding out. You want Circle E or not?"

Brandy Bill had been standing in the doorway. He turned now and hurried along the bar, fat belly wobbling, watery eyes jittering in their sockets.

"Some Crossbow hands coming, Chase," he puffed.

Chase permitted himself one of his few grins. "You go find some good, tight cover, Bill. A dozen Crossbow hands ain't enough to make me run."

"They'll hang you," Brandy Bill quavered. "I don't want no trouble in here."

"There won't be much." Chase jerked a thumb at the door. "Git, Dusty. No use of you getting into this fracas."

"What the hell?" Dusty asked. "They've got no reason to go after you."

"Maybe not, but I'm the gent they're after all right. That's why I came down today. Didn't have no notion you'd show up. Git now."

"I'm staying."

CHASE cursed bitterly. "Then git down to the other end of the bar."

Dusty obeyed, easing his gun in leather as he paced along the bar. Brandy Bill had disappeared. Crossbow came in a

moment later, Sim Spain swaggering in front, two riders behind him. There had been three at the corrals half an hour before, gun-hung men typical of the salty Crossbow crew. The absence of the third man worried Dusty. Spain wouldn't tackle anyone with less than all he had.

"Howdy, Sim," Chase said evenly. "I didn't take your invitation."

"I told you we'd swing you if you stayed." Spain licked his lips as if the taste of anticipation was a pleasant one. "Now we'll do the job on yonder cottonwood."

"What's the matter with you, Spain?" Dusty cried. "Al ain't done nothing."

"Tell him what you've been eating, Chase," Spain ordered.

"Crossbow beef," Chase murmured. "A man gets tired of venison."

"You see, Eagan," Spain said. "Crossbow don't stand for rustling. One cow or a hundred. Same thing."

The injustice of it took another twist on Dusty's already taut nerves. There were about fifteen little outfits scattered around the valley, and all of them butchered Crossbow cows when they wanted a beef. Both Beam and Spain knew it and let it go because it was cheaper than arousing the hatred of their little neighbors and starting some large scale rustling. Now there was no sense in hanging Al Chase when he'd butchered one Crossbow cow.

"All right, Sim," Chase said coolly. "There's three of you. Come and get me."

Dusty had stepped away from the bar, right hand brushing gun butt. None of them were watching him because they didn't expect him to interfere. It wasn't his fight, and he had no business in it. He stood motionless, waiting for it to play out. He had a notion Sim Spain was tough when the cards were running his way, but he doubted that the foreman had the kind of guts it took to draw against Al Chase.

Spain grinned, his wind-reddened face full of arrogant insolence. He said, "I don't have to get you, Chase. Randy's in the back. He'll drill you the first move you make."

Chase didn't turn. "Purty old, Sim. I figgered you had enough brains to think of something better. Go ahead. Let's start the smoke."

Dusty thought, "He just doesn't give a damn. He ain't particular 'bout living."

Spain's grin was a steady lengthening of thin lips. "There won't be no smoke about this. Just a rope. Come in, Randy. Let him see what a gun feels like sticking in his back."

The Crossbow man came in through the back door, a cocked .44 in his hand. He shoved it hard against Chase's spine. "How does it feel, rustler?"

Chase's hands came up. He made a slow turn of his head until he could see Dusty. He said, "So long, kid. Guess I won't be taking that deal you offered. Don't forget what I said. Hang and rattle."

RANDY had pulled Chase's guns and laid them on the bar. Spain said, "That's better. Joe, get a rope."

"Don't bother, Joe." Dusty's gun was lined on Spain. "Thought maybe you were joshing, Spain, but don't look that way. Randy, drop your iron."

"Are you a complete damn fool, Eagan?" Spain bawled. "We don't like you much anyway. You horn into this, and you're a dead pigeon."

"Then I'm a dead pigeon. Randy, drop that iron."

The Crossbow man laid his gun on the bar beside Chase's. He circled around Chase until he stood beside Spain and the other two.

"All right, Al," Dusty called. "Pick up your irons."

Chase slid one Colt into leather and eared back the hammer on the other one. "You're making a mistake, son. Windy ain't gonna like this."

"That sure as hell is right," Spain breathed. "I ain't joshing on this, neither. I tell you you're a dead pigeon. Nancy's crazy notion about you won't save your hide."

"Maybe not." Dusty came quickly along the bar, stripped off his gunbelt and laid it on the mahogany. "Sim, I've had a notion for a long time I wanted to lick you just to show Windy you ain't as tough as he allows. Now I'm gonna do it."

"Dusty, you must be plumb loco—" Chase began.

"Yep. Plumb loco. Keep the others out of it, Al."

Spain took off his gunbelt and tossed it on the floor. He was a taller man than Dusty with a comparable advantage in reach. Aside from that they were evenly matched with one exception. For months the loneliness, the frustration, the want of Nancy and the growing knowledge that he couldn't have her had brought Dusty to the place where his nervous tension had to have release. This was it. Spain had taken three steps into the center of the saloon when Dusty slammed into him, the impact of their bodies jarring the bottles behind the bar. From that moment Spain's advantage of reach was of little help to him.

Dusty's fists were battering sledge hammers. He slashed Spain's belly, rattled his head with a short, wicked right, and drove another blow at his heart. Spain backed up, turning his head, parrying, taking some of Dusty's punches on elbows and shoulders. He retreated to the bar. Dusty, overanxious, tried to pin him there and failed. Spain wheeled away, hooked him on the side of the head, and started backing again.

Turning, Dusty went after him. Spain, reversing his tactics, stood solid and stepping inside Dusty's upswinging right, caught him on the head. Dusty slashed him over the heart again. They locked then, exchanging head-rocking blows for a moment, the thud of fist on bone running the length of the room. It was hard, punishing fighting, Dusty taking more punches than he realized. He wasn't thinking past this one moment. Spain represented Windy Beam's power and arrogance and that, rather than Sim Spain's body, was what Dusty wanted to lick.

Spain had no stomach for this kind of fighting. He started back again, trying to hold Dusty off with his greater reach, but nothing short of a knockout punch could have held Dusty Eagan off. He got Spain on the neck, a right to the nose that brought a gush of blood. Then Spain, backing too fast, slammed into a poker table and sprawled flat, cards and chips cascading over him.

"Git up, Sim," a Crossbow man yelled. "He'll boot you."

But that wasn't Dusty's way. He let Spain regain his feet before he drove at him again. He forced him against the wall and held him there while he rocked his head with short, wicked blows. Spain tried to knee him in the crotch. Turning, Dusty took it on his thigh. He sledged Spain in the kidneys, saw hurt crawl into the man's face. His mouth sprung open, a sort of helplessness came over him. He pawed at Dusty, clubbing blows that held little power.

SENSING the moment, Dusty battered the man's fists down and brought a short up-swinging right to the point of his chin. Spain made a faint, sighing sound. His feet slid out from under him. He sat down, head rapping against the wall, and fell sideways.

Dusty stepped back, watching the Crossbow man for a moment to see if he was playing 'possum.

"He's out," Chase said. "Mighty purty son. As purty a job as I ever seen."

Sleeving blood and sweat from his face, Dusty stepped to the bar and buckled his gun belt around him. He said, "Get him out of here. Tell Windy the next time he thinks up a hanging job, we won't use fists."

Two riders picked Spain up and taking him outside, dropped him into the horse trough. The one called Randy scooped up Spain's gunbelt and straightening, laid his gaze on Dusty. He was a little man, red-eyed, with an air of unsubdued violence about him that always made Dusty think of a stick of dynamite with a sparking fuse attached. There was talk that he was hiding out in the valley, that he had a bad record in Missouri and Kansas. Facing him now, Dusty could believe anything he had ever heard about the man.

"I don't forget it when a man gets the drop on me and takes my iron," Randy said evenly. "I won't forget what you done to Spain. If you're still in the country tonight, I'm coming after you."

He swung out of the saloon and, after mounting, waited in the road, his back to

the saloon door, a gesture of contempt that did not escape Dusty. Spain, dripping wet and still groggy, was hoisted into the saddle. Dusty watched them ride away. None looked back. Presently they were lost from sight in the cottonwoods along the river.

Dusty swung around and picked up his hat. Chase was still at the bar, a filled glass before him. He said, "Thanks, son, but that was plumb foolish. If you want to live to be an old man, don't ever take chips in another gent's fight."

"I don't want to live to be an old man," Dusty said sourly. His words didn't come right. His upper lip felt as big as a balloon. "Now about you taking Circle E. I'll make any kind of a deal you want. . . ."

"You can save your wind, son," Chase said. "I ain't running and you ain't. Unless you're just dead-set on being an old man, don't ever run from nothing."

"I ain't staying," Dusty muttered.

"Afraid?" Chase's brows rose, lines creased deep into his forehead. "Nope. You ain't afraid of nothing or you wouldn't have tackled Spain like you done."

"Hell, I told you about Nancy. . . ."

"Yeah, I remember," Chase gulped his drink and laid a coin on the bar. "I reckon that'll cover the liquor and Bill's trouble in picking up the cards and chips Spain was ornery enough to scatter 'round. Let's ride."

"Damn it, Al," Dusty bawled, clutching Chase's shoulder. "I want you to take Circle E. Just take it if it ain't worth nothing."

Chase jerked free, anger touching him for a minute. Then, softening, he said, "Let me tell you something, Dusty. This is an old story, Beam wanting to get rid of the little fry. I'm just the one they started on, figgering I'd be a lesson for the rest and figgering I didn't have any friends. They made a mistake overlooking you. I ain't one to forget. That's why we're sticking. Now what we're gonna do is new. We're gonna fight like hell. When it's over, you and Nancy'll be tied up into a good, solid knot."

"Now who's loco?" Dusty jeered. "They'll throw thirty men at us tonight, and what kind of a girl do you reckon Nancy is? Think she'd have me if I was

As his finger tightened on the

alive when it's over . . . old Windy gone. . . ."

"Thirty men can die as well as two," Chase said, "and Windy's gonna deserve anything he gets. I figger Nancy's level-headed enough to know that. I'll be over for supper. From now on you and me are together."

DUSTY stayed close to the cabin the rest of the day, doing the little chores that he had been putting off because there never seemed to be time for them. He hurt in more places than he had thought Spain had hit him. By dusk he had the cabin cleaned up, a pot of beans on

trigger, Dusty knew Nancy was calmer than he

the stove, and ammunition laid on a shelf by the door. He had filled every bucket on the place with water and had cut a hole in the roof. Fire was the one thing that could root him and Chase out.

He couldn't get Nancy out of his mind, wondering what she had thought when he hadn't kept his date with her after he'd talked to Windy. He was ashamed, now that he considered it. He'd taken the easiest way out. He should have told her how it was, made a clean break. Start over for both of them. There were other girls; there would be other men for Nancy, but not, he hoped, Sam Spain.

Then Dusty knew he was being a fool. There'd never be another woman for him, and from what Nancy had said, there would never be another man for her.

But he knew he was right. He looked around the cabin. Dirt floor, the rusty stove, one window, the shelves with the cans of grub, the rough hand-made furniture, the narrow bunk in the corner. No, he couldn't bring her here. He'd hate himself if he did, but if he'd seen her, he'd have weakened. He was taking the easy way, but it was the best.

Chase rode in a little before dusk. The air was beginning to cool now that the sun was down. He brought his saddle and Winchester inside and dropped them in the

corner. "I'm moving in, friend. I just burned myself out."

"What for?"

"So Beam can't use my cabin in case they're lucky tonight. It's my guess they'll ride by my place first. Then they'll look here. If you don't want—"

"None of that," Dusty cried. "I ain't sure I'm gonna hang on and rattle, but I figger on burning some powder tonight."

Chase stepped to the door. He stood there a moment, staring into the valley that was darkening now with dusk purple. "Just one thing. I'm mighty fond of that sorrel. I'd hate for Beam's wolf pack to get him."

"We can't hold the shed and cabin, too."

"We'll have to hide our horses." Chase glanced up at the sky. Clouds were moving in from the La Sals. "Be darker'n the inside of a bull's gut. Trouble is, they'll throw a circle around here. Once they get us on foot, we're licked." He motioned toward the creek. "How 'bout down there?"

The creek had gouged a small, twisting canyon out of the mesa south of the cabin. Thinking about it, Dusty nodded thoughtfully. "There's a patch of scrub oak down there tall enough to hide a giraffe. I'll take 'em."

"You'll stay here," Chase ordered. "I'll take 'em."

Chase disappeared without waiting for Dusty's agreement, and presently the sound of hoofs died as both horses dipped out of sight into the canyon.

Chase was back within a few minutes. "They won't find 'em tonight. If they hang on till morning and start looking, they'll run onto 'em. So we'd better run 'em out afore sunup."

They ate by lamplight, ears strained for the first sound of attack. Dusty had covered the window, bored loopholes on all four sides of the cabin, and barred the door. There was nothing to do but wait. He wasn't hungry. He ladled a spoonful of beans into his plate and forced them down. A funny feeling squeezed his stomach, a squeeze that tightened with each minute. This was the craziest thing he had ever let himself in for, trapped like a wild animal while Crossbow moved in.

THERE was nothing wrong with Chase's appetite. He emptied the bean dish, finished the biscuits, and drank four cups of coffee. Leaning back in his chair he patted his stomach. "You'll make some woman a fine wife, Dusty." He fished tobacco and paper from his pocket. "Yes sir, right good cooking job."

"What's the matter with you?" Dusty got up and walked aimlessly around the room. "We'll be dead by morning, and you sit there and fill your belly like you'd never et a meal in your life."

"Haven't et many lately," Chase admitted. "As for being dead, I don't give a damn. What's there in living anyhow?" The bitterness at the corners of his mouth deepened. "That's why I'm gonna make you stay if I have to lay a gunbarrel over your noggin. I keep telling you there's only one woman in the world for a man. You say it's Nancy. All right. If you're lying, get to hell out of here. If you ain't, you'd better be dead than to try living without her."

Dusty stood by the stove building a smoke. He couldn't see it. Not now, but he was twenty years younger than Al Chase. Maybe Chase knew.

"And if we're still able to kick by morning," Dusty inquired bitterly, "what happens then?"

"Ain't thought that far." Chase yawned. "I'm just hoping I'll be able to get my sights lined on that Randy hombre. Sim Spain ain't so much, but Randy now. He's got the smell of a bad one on him."

Dusty stiffened. A horse was coming up the trail. Fast. He jerked his gun and moved to a loophole by the door.

"Don't go off half-cocked," Chase advised. "You never know who might come riding by." He moved to the door and lifted the bar. "No sir, you just never know."

Cursing savagely, Dusty wheeled to the table and blew out the lamp. "For a gent who's smelled powdersmoke, you sure are careless."

"Nope. Careful." Chase had opened the door. He called, "Who is it?"

The horse was pulled up in front of the cabin now, a black bulk in the starlight.

It was Nancy who answered, "I want to see Dusty. Is he there?"

"Sure. Come on in." Chase turned, laughing softly. "You see, Dusty? You just never can tell who might come riding by."

Dusty automatically holstered his gun. He stood by the table, too dazed to think straight. It couldn't be Nancy out there, not when Sim Spain might throw a ring of men around the cabin any minute and start pouring lead into the log walls.

But it was Nancy, her slim, strong shape silhouetted in the doorway. She said, "Light a lamp, Dusty."

He obeyed mechanically, swearing softly when the hot chimney burned his fingers. He dropped the match and lifted his gaze to her. She was mighty near being pretty—graceful, with dark-brown eyes and hair so black that it held a sort of blue shine. Her full warm lips were parted now as she waited for him to speak.

"You'd better not stay," he said dourly. "There'll be trouble afore morning."

HER LIPS came together. Disappointment shadowed her face. Dusty paced around the table, not looking at her. He knew it would be like this when he saw her. That was why he hadn't kept the date with her. The sickness of wanting her and knowing he couldn't have her crawled along every nerve in his body.

"I am staying," she said calmly. "I came because you'll need another gun if you have trouble."

She turned to her mare. Chase asked, "Want me to get her out of here?"

She said, "Yes," and came back into the cabin with her rifle. She stood looking at him a moment, a proud, reserved girl, driven now by a determination that was beyond a man's understanding. "If you love me, Dusty, let me stay. Your life is my life."

He groaned, his hand swinging in a circular gesture at the cabin. "No, Nancy. Look at it. A boar's nest. Fit for hombres like me and Al, but not for you. I asked Windy this morning if I could get a little money to kind of fix it up. Put in a floor. Build another room for you. Buy up a few more cows. He said no, like we knew he would. Said you weren't for me."

"He's always had his own way," she said. "He can't understand why his girl won't buckle down same as the men he bullies." Her smile was soft, warming him with its message. "He couldn't understand about me loving you."

She fled into his arms. He kissed her. He had told himself he wouldn't, that they had to make a clean break and this was the time. Now he forgot his promises. This was the kiss they both had wanted, had needed, the kind of kiss that a man and woman give when the hunger for the other is so deep it is unbearable. It was fire and light, it was seeking and finding, it was need and answer.

Her body was pressed against his, his arms around her, steel clamps holding her to him. For this moment he was not lonely, for this moment life was perfect. He was not thinking. She was offering and he was taking; he could not bring himself to look ahead when he would be lonely again, to the twisting trail that ran on through the years.

Then her head was on his chest, and she was crying a little. He didn't know why unless she was looking ahead to that same trail. Then she whispered, her voice muffled by his shirt, "It's been so long, Dusty. I was afraid I'd never see you again, but I won't let it happen any more. I'll be with you, wherever you go, whatever you do."

He didn't say anything for a moment. He was seeing the cabin, the dirt floor and the rusty stove and the narrow, hard bunk. He was thinking of the handful of silver in his pocket. He thought, You can't do it, Dusty. You'll never look yourself in the face again if you do.

He pushed her back and tilted her face up so that he could see it. He said, "Look, honey. I love you so much it hurts, but your dad's right. You're not for me. He said Crossbow went to your husband, and he wouldn't let an outlaw's brother have it. I can't ever change that."

"You fool," she breathed. "That doesn't make any difference. An outlaw brother doesn't make you an outlaw."

"That ain't the way Windy looks at it.

It'd be like him to will Crossbow to Spain if you married me."

"But it doesn't make any difference, Dusty. Can't you understand that? I don't want Crossbow if I have to lose you to get it."

SHE WAS looking at it through the rosy film that love gave the future. She had never been hungry. She didn't know what it was to live in a cold cabin with a January wind knifing at them, to fight through deep snow to the creek and climb back with a bucket of water, to keep on wearing the same clothes, and patch and then patch the patches.

But Dusty Eagan knew. It had been the only kind of life he had ever known. He had seen ranch women try to live that way and die on their feet, hardened by privation until they were old at thirty. He wouldn't let Nancy throw away what she had. He loved her too much.

He turned, a shiver striking down his spine. "You'd better go back before it's too late."

"I'm never going back," she said patiently as if explaining something to a child. "I guessed what had happened when you didn't come this morning. When I got home Dad told me. I knew it would be that way, but I kept hoping. We have to hope, don't we, Dusty?"

He nodded, knowing he'd never tell her about all the things he had hoped these last months.

"You've got to go back," he muttered. "You can't stay here."

"Of course I can. I don't mind being improper. We'll get married as soon as we can. I left Dad a note. I told him he'd had his chance to treat us like a father should." She smiled a little tremulously. "I can't go back." She motioned to her faded blue shirt and levis. "I didn't bring any clothes. I couldn't get any money, so I can't dress up for you when we're married. You won't mind, darling?"

"No." He looked at her helplessly. She'd be mighty ragged before he had any money to buy her the clothes she needed. Windy Beam would paw and beller like a bull in fly time. He'd bust Dusty just to make Nancy come home and beg. He cried out, "I tell you I can't let you."

"Oh, Dusty. I thought I could make you understand."

She came to him quickly and put her arms around his neck. He kissed her, but the fire had gone out of it. What more could he do? She didn't know and he couldn't make her see.

"Too bad to bust that up," Chase said softly, "but I think they're coming."

Their lips parted. Dusty swung to face Chase, hand reaching for his gun. Chase had slipped noiselessly through the cedars back to the cabin. He stood at the edge of the shaft of light, head cocked, listening. Dusty heard it then. A dozen horses or more, he guessed.

"What'd you do with her mare?" Dusty demanded. "She's got to get out of here."

"I'm not going," Nancy said stubbornly. "Three rifles are better than two, and if

you've forgotten, I can shoot as straight as you can."

He couldn't forget. They'd shot together too many times. Nancy was the kind of girl old Windy Beam could be proud of.

"Once they get us penned up in here," Dusty groaned, "they'll keep shooting till they get us. Get out now."

"I reckon she's safer inside than out," Chase said. "If they hear a horse they'll come a-smoking. They won't know who they got till after they plug her."

Chase pushed Dusty out of the door, shut and barred it, and filled his pockets with shells. "Take the rest of these .30-30's."

"Nancy, your father may be out there," Dusty cried. "If you're shooting—"

HER BACK was straight, her chin high. "It may be I'll hit him," she said, "but it can't be any other way. He might kill you, Dusty. Then I'd hate him the rest of my life."

Nancy had taken her part of the shells and tossed the last box to Dusty.

"All set?" Chase asked.

"All set," Nancy answered.

She was perfectly cool. Chase looked as happy as Dusty had ever seen him, like a kid anticipating the Fourth of July. Dusty thought, He just don't give a damn.

"Dusty?" Chase asked.

"All set."

"That's fine. Now I'm gonna run this show. I figger, outside of Randy, they ain't got a solid man in the bunch. We'll hold our fire till they get close. Keep your lead low. It's my guess Windy ain't there. Looks more like Spain's doings. When they call out, don't answer. When they try busting that door down, let 'em have it."

"Dad didn't like what Spain did this morning," Nancy said. "He was afraid a hanging would start real trouble."

"He's sharper than that fool Spain," Chase muttered.

There was no sound of the horses. Crossbow, Dusty guessed, was circling the cabin. He said, "Better douse the light, hadn't we?"

"You take that loophole, Dusty." Chase pointed to the one beside the door. "Nancy, get down flat yonder." He jerked a thumb at the opposite wall. "I'll keep an eye on the other side of the door. It's my guess they'll try busting it down." He nodded at Dusty. "Yeah, douse the light. I just wanted to be sure they saw it so they'd know somebody was here."

Dusty blew out the lamp and moved to his place beside the door. Al Chase was a tough hand. Dusty had never known how tough until now. It was as if he had suddenly come alive, as if he had found something he enjoyed. Randy, out there with Crossbow, was the same kind.

Thinking about it now as he stood with his rifle barrel through the loophole, hammer back, Dusty saw that these two stood out. Cedar valley, far off the beaten trail, was a perfect hide-out for men who wanted to be forgotten. Men of dark passion, born of trouble, living to kill, they were the kind who would never forget a friend nor an enemy.

The darkness was complete. Outside there was only silence except for the coyote calls. Inside there was no sound but Dusty's own breathing. Nancy, Dusty thought, was taking this more coolly than he.

The minutes passed, dragging their leaden feet. A twig snapped in front of the cabin. Complete silence again. The cedars were scattered round clumps, black dots in the black night.

A thought knifed Dusty. Chase hadn't been too surprised when Nancy had come tonight. He'd led her mare away so that she'd had to stay. He'd said she'd be safer inside than if she tried to get away, but there had been plenty of time before they'd heard the horses. He turned it over in his mind, trying to understand it, and failing.

It came then, without warning, without preface. Rifle fire from the lip of the creek canyon. Lead ripped into the logs, through the chinking of the door. It snapped across the cabin to slap into the far wall. One bullet thwacked into a bucket, and in a sudden quiet Dusty heard the liquid whisper of water streaming to the floor.

"You, Eagan." It was Sim Spain's voice calling from his hiding place behind a cedar. "We've got fifteen men out here. You and Chase ain't got no show. Come on out or we'll give you some more lead."

"Don't answer," Chase breathed.

THE SILENCE that followed might have lasted ten seconds or ten minutes. Dusty found his finger tightening against the trigger. He relaxed, forced himself to wait. The firing came again, all fifteen men opening up at once. Flashes of gunfire stabbed the darkness. One bullet laced through the chinking, hit the stove and screamed across the room. Again the firing stopped as suddenly as it had started.

"They'll come now, I reckon," Chase murmured. "Randy'd wait it out, but I don't figger Spain's built that way."

Chase had it right. Dusty heard the scurry of feet, a man's sullen curse as he stumbled on a rock and sprawled into the dirt. Dusty made them out, a black knot rushing the shack, a log held between them.

They had almost reached the door before Chase let go his first bullet. Dusty

pressed trigger an instant later, jacked another shell into place, and fired again. The cabin trembled with the explosions as shots blasted into the throbbing echoes.

Men fell across the log. Others ran. Some howled in agony or cursed. Sim Spain bawled orders to stand and smash the door in, but he wasn't heard. Before Dusty's rifle was empty, the only Crossbow men in front of the cabin were the ones who couldn't move.

"You all right, Nancy?" Dusty called softly.

She was beside him, her arm around him. "All right, Dusty. You think they'll try it again?"

"Not that trick," he said. "I can see three of your men out there. Mebbe more. Too dark to be sure."

"They aren't my men," she said with quick bitterness. "We've got some honest cowhands and some who are killers like Randy. That's Spain's doing. He's talked Dad into hiring toughs so they can keep the little ranchers in line."

Dusty heard Chase's soft laugh. He called out, "Want some more, Spain?" When there was no answer, he shouted, "I'll make you a deal, you yellow-backed snake. Walk out of them cedars and I'll come out of the cabin. If I take you, your bunch goes home. If you get me, Eagan comes out with his hands up."

Nancy cried out, "No," but Chase's laugh mocked her.

"Don't get spooked over that, ma'am. Spain don't want none of it."

NO ANSWER came from the cedars. The silence had settled down except for a man's steady groaning. Then another cried out in shrill agony, and Randy's voice, "He's knifed, Spain. Cut to pieces."

Chase let out a whoop. "That's it. Stay here, you two." He lifted the bar, slammed the door open and plunged into the darkness.

Dusty dropped his Winchester and pulled his six. He started to follow and remembered Nancy. He stood a moment in indecision. Then he knew his gun was not needed. Crossbow had had enough. Spain's men were taking the narrow trail at a reckless pace.

"Light the lamp, Dusty," Chase called. "Ain't nothing here but dead men."

Dusty turned back into the cabin, touched a match to the wick, and replaced the chimney.

"Quite a shindig," a familiar voice said.

Dusty wheeled to the door and stood gaping in stunned surprise. Pete Eagan was slouching against the door jamb, a cold cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth, fingers fishing in his pocket for a match.

"Know this hombre, Dusty?" Chase asked.

"Met him once. 'Bout twenty-five years ago." Dusty stepped to the door and shook hands. "Ain't you lost, Pete?"

"Nope. Smelled trouble and came a-running." Pete lighted his cigarette, eyes admiring Nancy who was standing beside the stove. "Just can't stay out of a fight."

"My brother Pete, Nancy," Dusty said. "Pete, Nancy Beam."

Nancy's cool voice seemed to come from a great distance. "How do you do, Pete."

"Happy to know you, ma'am. Dusty sure does have good notions about women."

"Maybe you'd better come in and shut the door," Dusty said. "In case some of them coyotes are still nosing around."

"Don't need to worry none." Chase sat down on the bunk. "What'll happen tomorrow is something else, but they had plenty for tonight. Got five of 'em, Dusty, and didn't get a scratch. None of us. I'm thinking Spain'll let Randy run the next show."

"I whittled two of 'em," Pete said with satisfaction. "Snuck up and slit their gullets afore they knew what was happening. I'd have got the whole outfit if that last one hadn't gurgled a mite."

"That's what boogered 'em," Chase said. "They didn't know what was working on 'em in the dark."

"What are you doing over here?" Dusty demanded.

Pete grinned around his cigarette. "That Moab country is kind of purty the first time you see it, but after a year it looks like hell. Me, I kind of got a hankerin' for

the mountains, so I rode over and stumbled onto Al's place. He said you was in a tight, so I came along. Hid out, figgering I might do more good than in here."

"Go on," Chase said testily. "Give him the real reason you're here."

"Me and Al used to ride together," Pete said. "He got an idea and I heard the leaves rustle. You tell him, Al."

Chase began building a smoke, gaze drifting from Nancy to Dusty and back. "It's this way," he said at last. "I had a little trouble in Wyoming a while back, and this seemed about the quietest place I could find." He shrugged. "But hell, after while you get to talking to yourself. I've got to find something to do. Now where would you go, Dusty, if you wanted to kick up a good ruckus?"

"I'd stay here," Dusty said. "I've got one."

"Sure, sure, but I mean a man's got to have a little fun."

"Wagon Tire, I guess," Dusty said. "Must be hell on high red wheels up there."

"That's what me and Pete want. We're aiming to tear that burg apart. Four, five thousand people. Any game you want, the sky's the limit, and women." He blew a speculative smoke ring. "Not as purty as you, ma'am, but they do say that Jennifer Gale is a good looker and a mighty good singer."

DUSTY pinned his gaze on Pete. There was more here than he could see. Pete hadn't changed in the year since Dusty had seen him. His clothes were more ragged, his face thinner. The two of them looked much alike except that Pete was five years older and he had the same kind of reckless don't-give-a-damn look about him that Chase did. Judging from his worn levis and jumper, the hole in his once-expensive Stetson, his worn-out boots, the outlaw business hadn't been very good lately.

"You're talking in circles," Dusty said flatly.

"All right, kid." Pete's powder-grey eyes turned to Nancy. "You tell him, ma'am."

Chase jumped as if he'd been stung. He grabbed the cigarette out of his mouth, half rose, and fell back. He didn't say anything, but his gaze whipped to Nancy, a sudden, lean sharpness drawing his face tight.

"I don't know whether you'll like this or not, Dusty," Nancy was saying. "You're so independent you never want to listen to anybody else, but it seems to me we ought to steal an idea from Dad. He's got the notion of driving a big herd to Wagon Tire. People have been pouring in all summer. When the pass is closed, they'll be hungry. He says he'll get forty, maybe fifty dollars a head."

"How many does he figger on?"

"About a thousand head. The boys are gathering them now."

"I've got better'n a hundred," Dusty breathed. "If we got 'em up there first, we'd get the top price." He licked his lips. "We could fix the cabin up, Nancy, and still have enough to buy a herd in Utah next spring and bring 'em over the La Sals."

"It's a good idea," Nancy murmured, as if it had been Dusty's idea.

"You thought of it first," Dusty mumbled. He wiped a hand across his face. "Ain't such a good idea after you think of it a spell."

"Why not?" Chase demanded. "You'll never get any more for 'em. If it's a bad winter you'll lose some."

"You may lose all of them," Nancy said. "Dad won't let you turn them into the valley this winter."

Dusty threw up his hands. "I'd look fine driving a hundred head to Wagon Tire by myself, now wouldn't I?"

"I can make a hand," Nancy said.

"I won't. . . ." Dusty began.

Chase rose and dropped his cigarette stub into the stove. "I've been wanting to see Wagon Tire. I'll go along."

"I'm sure agin' honest work," Pete said, "but since it's you, kid, I'll help you. Al and me have got the same idea about Wagon Tire. We ain't knocked over a bank together for a long time. Maybe you'd like to come—"

Nancy wheeled on him, eyes sparking. "Don't you ever say that again. Go ahead and be an outlaw. I don't suppose you're

ashamed of it. I don't suppose you're even ashamed of what you've done to Dusty."

"Ashamed?" Pete rubbed his stubble-dark chin. "No, can't say I'm ashamed. What'd I do to Dusty?"

"You just gave my father a reason for saying we couldn't get married," she blazed. "Said he'd see to it that Crossbow didn't go to an outlaw's brother."

Pete turned and spit his cigarette stub into the yard. When he brought his gaze back to Nancy's face, there was a tight grin on his reckless mouth. "Now that seems right narrow-minded, ma'am, but I'll make it up. When I run into your old man, I'll beat hell out of him."

Nancy tried to say something and choked. It was Dusty who said, "We'll sleep outside." He jerked a thumb at the bunk. "Do the best you can on that, Nancy. We'll slope out come sunup, but you ain't going. Soon as Spain finds out what's up, he'll be on our tail."

"I'll help you gather," she said as if she hadn't heard. "Once you get them pointed for Wagon Tire you three can manage."

WITH his head on his saddle and his eyes on the cloud-curtained sky, Dusty Eagan thought about what had happened this night. Hope burned high in him again, hope that had been completely dead after he had left Crossbow that morning. Five thousand dollars! More money than he had even seen. Or four thousand if he got forty dollars a head. Wagon Tire was a boomtown with boomtown prices. His cows were in good shape. They'd fetch forty dollars anyhow.

Nancy had thought about it long before he had. She had known what her father planned, and that was where the trouble would come. Windy Beam was overshooting the mark with a thousand head. He'd move a chunk of hell just to keep Dusty's cattle out of Wagon Tire. Another hundred would be too many.

Then a thought that had been nagging at the back of his mind struck Dusty with the jarring impact of a downsweeping club. Pete had told Nancy to tell him. The three of them must have talked it over. Dusty was remembering how Chase had looked. Chase hadn't wanted him to know they'd planned the drive to Wagon Tire before he heard about it.

A sullen anger festered in Dusty as the thought took root in his mind. They knew his pride, Nancy and Chase anyhow, and Chase knew he was ready to ride out. Maybe it was the way they had to do it, but he didn't like it. He was old enough to manage his own business. If Nancy was going to be that kind of wife. . . . This his anger washed out of him. He'd take her, managing wife or not if he could support her. She was his woman. But there could be no peace, no happiness here on the mesa as long as Windy Beam felt the way he did, and it would take a deal of doing to change his feelings.

It was still dark when the clatter of pans in the cabin woke Dusty. He knuckled his eyes, saw that Pete was still asleep, but Chase was getting up.

"Better let Pete sleep as long as you can," Chase said softly. "He had a big ride getting here. I'll fetch the horses."

Something else Dusty didn't understand. If Pete had stumbled onto Chase's place as he'd said, he wouldn't have had a big ride yesterday. Dusty was still wondering about it when he washed in the battered basin on the bench in front of the cabin. A thin film of ice had formed over the bucket of water. He came fully awake, the cold water stabbing him with the piercing chill of a thousand needles.

Nancy had the fire going and was slicing bacon when he came in. She lifted her mouth for his kiss, her eyes caressing him momentarily before she turned again to the bacon. The coffee pot was on the stove, plates on the table.

They ate by lamplight, Pete still drowsy, while the pearl light of early dawn began gathering above the notch-scarred skyline of the San Juan range far to the east.

When they had finished, they loitered a moment over the last of their coffee. Chase, building a smoke, gave Dusty a direct look. "How long will it take you to gather your herd?"

"Not long," Dusty said. "Most of 'em are just across the creek."

"How you aiming to take 'em?"

"We'll have to miss the valley so Crossbow won't know what we're up to," Dusty said thoughtfully. "Reckon we'll push 'em across the Dolores and back up on the mesa."

"It would be better to make a night drive," Nancy said. "Nobody lives in the east valley. Once you're across the river you can keep 'em going. Nobody'll see us unless we just happen to stumble onto some puncher, and you'll move faster than if you're on the mesa."

SHE WAS right. Dusty should have thought of it. Still irritation beat at him. Nancy refused to fit into the pattern he had mentally framed for her. She was a rich man's daughter, used to having everything she wanted. But she had cooked breakfast with as much speed and efficiency as a woman born to such primitive facilities. She could ride and shoot with the best; she had been as cool under fire last night as any veteran. Now she was showing a foresight that was close to astonishing.

Dusty beat down his pride, nodded, and said, "We'll try it. There's a ford above Tailholt. Hard to tell how long it'll take to get to Wagon Tire. We'd better pack all the grub we've got."

"I've got a pack animal," Pete said.

Chase laid down his cigarette and finished his coffee. He said hesitantly as if this was something he'd rather not say, "Dusty, I've got a notion they don't come no lower'n Sim Spain, and I know what goes on in the kind of head Randy's got. If there's anything in this cabin you want, you'd better take it."

"Just one thing, I reckon," Dusty said. Rising, he took down a picture from a shelf in the corner, a tintype of his mother. He looked at it briefly, then slid it into his pocket. He didn't show it to Pete and his brother didn't ask what it was. Probably, he thought, Pete didn't know he had it. "All right. Won't take long to throw the grub together."

It was daylight when they mounted, the air thin and chill, the valley still purple-cast with slowly retreating shadows. For a moment Nancy stood looking out across it to Crossbow. Dusty could see the side of her face, the throb of the pulse in her throat. It would never be the same again.

Turning, Nancy gave one of the logs in the cabin wall a pat. She smiled brightly at Dusty. "We could have been happy there," she said, and stepping to her mare, mounted.

"Visitors," Chase said. "Or just one, mebbe." He drew his gun. "Stay out of it, you two."

It was a single horse coming up the snake-trail from the valley. Questions beat at Dusty. It was worse than foolish for one of them to come alone, Randy or Sim Spain or any of them. Then the rider topped the rim, and Dusty heard his own breath come out of him in gusty surprise. It was Windy Beam.

"No trouble," Dusty breathed.

Chase threw him a questioning look.

"If he was on the prod," Dusty answered, "he'd have brought the bunch. Let him talk."

GRUMBLING, Chase slid his gun back. He held his silence until Beam reined up. He said darkly, "You make a funny move, mister, and I'll shoot your brains out of your head, providing you've got any."

Windy Beam looked as if he'd aged twenty years since Dusty had seen him the morning before. The change was not physical. It was in the way he sat his saddle, the slump of his shoulders, the absence of

the arrogant mannerisms that had been a part of him as long as Dusty had known him.

"I'm not here for trouble, Chase." He brought his gaze to Nancy, questioningly as if not sure of himself. "I came to ask you to come home. I'll beg you if it'll make any difference."

Dusty couldn't look at Nancy, but he sensed what was going on inside her. It was a long moment before she could force herself to say, "No, Dad. You know how I feel."

"I didn't sleep any last night. The house was too empty. It'll be empty until you come back." Beam took off his Stetson and wiped his forehead, his closely cropped hair silver-bright in the sunlight. "You write your own ticket. Even Eagan if that's what you want."

"No," Dusty said somberly. "I won't be beholden to you."

The corners of Beam's mouth twitched. Dusty, watching him closely, felt a pity for him. He knew what it took for Windy Beam to surrender.

"Write your own ticket, girl," Beam repeated.

"No. We'll have our home, built with our hands. You'll always be welcome, Dad, but we wouudn't feel right going to Crossbow."

Beam wiped his forehead again and replaced his hat. There was little of the old belligerence when he looked at Dusty. "Don't you ever treat her wrong, boy. I'm telling you."

"Don't try telling me anything," Dusty flung back. "Not after the way you've treated her."

"Me?" Beam cried. "Why, I've given her anything—almost anything she wanted." His gaze swung to Pete. "Who's this?"

"The name's Pete Eagan," Pete said darkly. "I'm just an outlaw, not a skunk who'd hire a bunch of wolves like the ones you sent after us last night. Nancy says you won't let 'em get married 'cause I'm Dusty's brother. Why, you mealy-mouthed old hypocrite, alongside you I've got pink-tipped wings."

Anger sang in the old man's veins. He bawled, "You see, Nancy? It's like I told you. You coming home now?"

"I was in the cabin when Spain attacked us," she said. "There'll be trouble as long as he's here. Get rid of him."

"I didn't order that raid. I don't like it, but I can't get rid of him." Beam lifted his reins. "Where you going now?"

"Wagon Tire."

The big shoulders straightened. The square chin was thrust forward. He had lost. Now he tried to cover his wounds with a show of the old domineering manner.

"All right, Eagan. You're gonna be my son-in-law, so I'll make the best of it. She's all I've got. I'll be in Wagon Tire in a few days. You'd better be damned sure you're married."

If they had been on the ground and Dusty had been close enough, he would have struck Beam before that first wild flare of anger died. But Nancy's hand was on his arm and she was saying evenly, "We'll be married."

Wheeling his horse, Beam rode over the lip of the red wall and down the trail. It struck Dusty that Windy Beam was afraid of Sim Spain. Then he thought he must be mistaken. It didn't make sense for a man like Windy Beam who had ridden roughshod over this range for years to be afraid of his ramrod. Still, he had battered down his own pride to come here and beg his daughter to return home, but when she had told him to get rid of Spain, he had said he couldn't.

But it didn't add up and he thought he was mistaken until they turned their horses toward the creek and he heard Al Chase say thoughtfully, "Now what in hell is that old boy spooked over?"

IT WAS a hot day for so late in the year. The miles they rode were endless and beyond number, gathering and pushing, through the scarlet jungles of scrub oak, down the boulder-freckled slope toward the river, through piñons and cedars, slim islands of shade in a sun-drenched sea, the dust a red curtain hanging motionless over an oven-hot earth.

By dusk they were down and across, the

herd held in a deep break in the high-walled gorge. For a time the riders rested. Dusty built a fire of cottonwood drift, bone-dry, and Nancy, as tired and dirt-smudged as the others, insisted on cooking supper for them.

Darkness slid slowly across the land, and the day's heat was lost. There was little talk. The lights of Tailholt could be glimpsed westward where the river cut across the long flat of Cedar valley. One thought was in all of their minds. It was a question of putting miles between them and Crossbow, or having a running fight all the way to Wagon Tire.

"You said you'd go on after we finished gathering," Dusty said, worry for the girl's safety honing his temper thin.

"She made a right good hand today," Pete murmured.

"She's done more'n her share now," Dusty grated. "She's going on."

Chase tilted his face up, cigarette pasted to his lower lip, his hard hat pushed back. "It ain't a question of us needing her, or what she said. It's a proposition of where she's gonna be the safest. If she was my gal, I'd hate like hell to turn her loose in this country with Sim Spain running around."

"All right," Dusty said, and began kicking out the fire. He'd lost. Nancy would go with them all the way to Wagon Tire.

It was a long, cold night, the sky crystal clear, a thin moon climbing slowly into the high vault. The valley was a long narrow passage pointing to the east. Once the herd was lined out, it was only a question of keeping them moving. That was Dusty's and Nancy's job. Chase and Pete fell behind, ears keening the wind for the click of steel shoes on rock, but none came.

A wild land, this Cedar valley, imprisoned within the great walls that were ribbed with grey and red in the daytime but now were black and close-pressing, the rim two straight lines that ran together in the distance. A feeling came to Dusty, a strange feeling that held a buoyant hope he had not known for months. He could forget the misery of the past; he could cease thinking about what was ahead. It was enough, this closeness. She was his partner. She had made her decision. There was no turning back.

They stopped near dawn in a rock-walled canyon at the east end of Cedar valley. Here was water and feed, a natural corral with Nancy and Dusty blocking the passage in front of the herd, Pete and Chase behind. They ate, slept a few hours and pushed out of the canyon. A lean, twisted-horned cow had assumed the leadership of the herd. They lined out across the mesa, a slow, plodding line, held down to the speed of the lazy and the weak in the drag.

It went that way through the long hours that added up to days. They left the mesa with its hogbacks and boulders and scattered twisted cedars and came to the Wagon Tire river, running high from a storm in the mountains, grey with tailings from the mills beyond the big camp. That night Al Chase relaxed beside the fire after he had eaten, cocked his derby back on his yellow-haired head, and laughed, the first laugh Dusty had heard come out of him since the morning they'd started the gather.

"We done it. By hell, we sure done it. I can't figger out how, but we done it, and that's good enough for me. Sim Spain won't stop us now."

THE OTHERS looked at him, puzzled, and then Pete nodded understandingly. "I don't reckon he will, but maybe he didn't want to stop us after the way we treated him."

"He wanted to all right," Chase said. "We foxed him. That's all."

"You expected a fight," Dusty accused. "Why in hell didn't you tell us?"

Chase shrugged. "No use worrying anybody. What I expect and what happens are two different things."

"They still might catch us," Nancy said.

"Nope. Or if they do, they'll have a hell of a time getting ahead of us. Me'n Pete could hold off an army in this canyon while you two took the herd on. Even Spain's smart enough to stay out of gunshot."

The nights had been clear and cold, the days hot. Now the stars were hidden by the black clouds that rolled in from the

west, and the lightning lashed the horizon with distant streaks. Dusty, standing night guard, listened to the steady growl of the river as it rolled toward the Dolores.

Two more days. Then Wagon Tire. He'd have five thousand dollars in his pocket. Nancy and he would get married. They'd get back to Cedar valley. If his cabin was burned, he'd build another. He was remembering what Nancy had told Windy Beam. They'd have their own home built with their own hands.

Those were Dusty's dreams, untarnished by the feeling of frustration that had plagued him for so long. Good dreams, the kind a man has when the certainty of accomplishment is a bright flame before him. There was no loneliness now. He had come to know Pete as he never had before. And Chase? Well, it was a miracle, as tough a hand as Dusty had ever known, but not so tough that he couldn't help out the one friend he'd had in Cedar valley.

It rained the next day, a roaring storm that hid the sharply serrated San Juans behind a curtain of slanting silver threads. Lightning crinkled across the sky, thunder was an ominous earth-shaking roar that sounded close enough to crumble the great walls of the canyon above them. The river ran high and blood red with silt dragged down from the cliffs by every stream that fed it. Then the sky cleared and the peaks were in sight again. They camped under another star-pointed sky, the air sharply fragrant with mountain smells and wood smoke and all the wild, damp odors that rise from a fecund, rain-soaked earth.

Chase took Dusty's place as night guard with dawn still two hours away. He said, "We get in tomorrow?"

"'Bout dark, I reckon, if we don't have no bad luck."

"We'd best camp a piece on this side," Chase said. "You go in with Nancy. Maybe find her a room." He dropped clinking coins into Dusty's hand. "Let her buy what she wants to get married in. Pay me back when you sell these critters."

Dusty looked down at the coins heavy in his palm, dull now in the starlight. "Thanks, Al." He sensed something that the other hadn't put into words, a fear perhaps that a wanted man feels when he is close to a settlement. Dusty said carefully, "I don't reckon it'll take long to get rid of the herd and find a preacher."

"Don't reckon it will," Chase agreed. He touched a match flame to his cigarette, the light ravelling up across his hard, bitter face. "You might look the burg over. Pete and me would hate like hell to bump into a U. S. Marshal."

Dusty hadn't thought of that. He said. "You boys don't need to go in at all. Me and Nancy can manage."

"We wouldn't miss it," Chase said quickly. "We're aiming to turn our wolf loose."

A QUESTION had been prodding Dusty's mind since the night of the fight. He gave it voice now. "Why did you and Pete do this?" he asked bluntly.

"To have some fun." Then he seemed to sense that the answer wouldn't do. "Maybe I'll tell you. Later."

Dawn came slowly like a pearl-tinted mist, washing out across the sky behind the granite peaks, then reached out and came downslope, flooding the gut of the Wagon Tire. Star lamps slowly winked out. The red arc of the sun glowed between two craggy peaks and color flamed on the red-rock walls of the canyon, in the changeless green of the spruce and the orange of the aspens.

Dusty, in the saddle now, threw back his head and let a howl rush out of him. Nancy jumped, frightened, and Pete laughed. "Don't worry none about that, ma'am. Us Eagans do that every morning the day afore we get married."

"Could be just spring," Chase said. "Hit him six months early."

Smiling, Nancy stepped into leather. "Just so he doesn't do that after we're married, or I'll think there's a wolf loose in the house."

Dusty leaned forward, winking. "There will be."

The herd headed out, a swaying line of red backs, the twisted-horned cow in the lead. Dusty's gaze swept out across them, anticipation a swelling pressure in him.

With a little luck, he'd have them off his hands tonight.

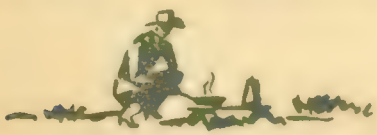
They reached the park where Wagon Tire lay, dusk beginning to flow across the earth. Chase waved toward the mining camp. "Go on in. She's had enough of menfolks to last her awhile. Find her a woman to talk to." Dusty nodded at Nancy and they rode on.

"Outlaws," Nancy mused. "I never knew finer men." She smiled then. "Except you."

Kerosene flares threw a weird light upon the street when Dusty and Nancy reached the mining camp. They worked their horses through the traffic—horsemen, burro trains, creaking ore wagons and trailers. Mud stirred into a sticky soup. Barkers called out the attractions of each saloon and gambling hall. Music made a steady din, beating at Dusty's ears with irritating insistence. This was Wagon Tire, brawling and lusty, greedy and grasping, Wagon Tire where a man could sin as long as his money lasted.

Then they were out of the traffic and into the east end of the camp, dark except for the lighted windows of the cabins that were scattered planlessly between the street and the north wall. To the south the river cut an arc around the town. From the mill a mile or more upstream came the pulsing rumble of the heavy stamps.

Worry beat at Dusty. He had never seen a boom camp, and he didn't like it now that he had seen one. He had supposed there



would be a hotel where he could take Nancy, but what rooms there were had been above the saloons and gambling places. Chase had said to find her a woman to talk to. He grinned sourly. The kind of women he'd find her were not women Nancy would want to talk to.

"Maybe we'd better ride back," Nancy said as if sensing his thoughts.

"I was just thinking that," he grunted. Then hope struck at him. There was a large cabin ahead. A lantern hanging above the door threw a murky light across a sign:

Abner Hawkins, Preacher
Here on the Lord's business
If I can help you, come

Nancy had seen the sign, but she held back when Dusty reined his roan across the street. "We can't get married tonight," she called.

"All right," he said, swinging down, "but we're sure in trouble. If he means what he says, he'll have a bed."

"But Dusty—"

HE DIDN'T wait. He pounded on the door, boots sinking into the mud. He heard steps, the door swung open, and he stood looking at a solemn, dark-garbed man.

"I'm Dusty Eagan." He waved toward Nancy who had reined up behind him. "This is Nancy Beam. We're fixing to get married. Maybe tomorrow."

"I'll be glad to accommodate you." The preacher held out his hand. "I'm Abner Hawkins. Come in."

Dusty lifted a boot, the mud seeking to hold it and squeaking its disappointment at failure. "No need of me coming in. We drove some cattle in from Cedar valley, and Nancy here ain't had no bed for quite a spell. The places down town didn't seem to be fitting for her."

Hawkins smiled, some of the sternness fading from his face. "No, they wouldn't be fitting for her. The good women in this town can be counted on the fingers of one hand, but you'd need more than your fingers and toes to count the others. Women like Jennifer Gale." His smile faded, leaving his face long and entirely sober. "Have your lady come in."

Dusty helped Nancy from the saddle and carried her through the mud to the cabin. A grey-haired woman had come out of a back room, plain-faced and friendly, radiating a goodness that was genuine.

"I heard what he said, Miss Beam." She took Nancy's hands. "I'm Mrs. Hawkins. We have very little, but we'll share with you anything we do have."

"I don't understand some of the things

the Lord lets happen." Hawkins said soberly. "He gave the devil a lease on this camp, and a man named Ace Justin carries out his will."

Dusty handed the preacher a gold eagle. "That's for her keep. We'll get married as soon as I sell my beef." He dropped the rest of the coins into Nancy's hand, and kissed her quickly, his face burning with embarrassment. "Now you buy what you need in the morning."

Abner Hawkins was scratching his lean chin, solemn eyes on Dusty. "You said you had cattle to sell?"

"A hundred head. If you'll tell me where I could find a butcher—"

"A butcher named Marlow lives in the third cabin behind this place, but there is no need to see him or any of the others. They won't buy unless Justin says they can, and Justin won't do that."

"What's Justin got to do with buying beef?" Dusty demanded.

HAWKINS spread his hands. "Everything. He dictates the life we live in this camp. Even tries to tell me what to preach on Sunday. It's an old story of gunmen and violence and murder. Intimidation." He shook his head. "I've been a missionary in a dozen Colorado mining camps. I'm used to this kind of life, but I'm not used to the excesses Justin goes to."

"I'll see this Marlow." Dusty turned to the door. "Do you have a shed where I can leave Nancy's mare?"

"I'll put the animal away." Hawkins moved in front of Dusty. "Go see Marlow, but I'm asking one thing. You're young. You're in love. Everything that is fine and beautiful in life is waiting for you. If you are killed tonight, you will not have any of those things in this world, and you'll bring tragedy to this young lady."

Dusty stared blankly at the long, solemn face, swung his gaze to Nancy who was standing stiff and suddenly frightened. He brought his eyes to Hawkins, anger rising in him. "Look, mister. I'm not hunting for trouble. What's the idea of scaring my girl to death?"

"You haven't told him enough, Abner." Mrs. Hawkins came to Nancy and put her arms around her. "Tell him what Justin is trying to do."

"It's simple and terrible," Hawkins said. "Many camps have a kingpin among the so-called sporting element. Justin is more than that. He has two killers who call themselves the Talcott brothers. It may not be their real name, but they are evil and tragically fast with their guns. The law of murder as carried out by them has made shambles of what small, legal order we had. Through them Justin dictates to the butchers, the storemen, and the restaurant operators. His object is to gain a monopoly on everything, including food, thereby robbing those who don't throw their wages away on his women, games, and whiskey."

"You're trying to tell me this Justin hombre won't let the butchers buy my beef?" Dusty demanded.

"That's right."

"Aw, he—I mean I'll cook that."

Dusty swung out of the cabin. Mrs. Hawkins's voice caught him before he mounted, "Don't be foolhardy, young man. My husband is to suffer the same fate others have if he doesn't leave town by tomorrow night."

Dusty turned back. "You going?"

"No." Hawkins shook his long head. "A man must live by certain standards. That's the glory of living." He waved a bony hand toward the business block. "That's only the tinsel. Perhaps I'll die, but the Lord has a way of working that is not always easy to understand. Perhaps my death will bring the cleansing."

Dusty grinned and winked at Nancy, not wanting to believe what the preacher had told him, but knowing that Nancy would be well cared for. He said, "We're beholden to you folks." Lifting his Stetson to Nancy, he stepped into the saddle and reined around the cabin, new worry chills raveling along his spine. To be this close to what he had set out to do and then be defeated was more than a man could stand. Nobody could have that much bad luck. He wouldn't believe it.

Dusty dismounted in front of the butcher's cabin, his knock bringing a broad-shouldered man to the door. Dusty asked, "You're Marlowe?"

"Yeah, I'm Marlow."

"I've got a hundred head of cattle we're holding below town. Not real fat but they'll do. You interested in seeing 'em?"

Marlow chewed a thick lower lip, face tightening with the pressure of some deep anger. Then he let it go in a belly-deep bawl, "Sure, I'd like to see 'em, but I can't buy 'em until Justin says so. Or maybe you don't know who runs this camp."

Dusty felt a tightening squeeze in his stomach. "I heard something about it, but didn't believe it."

"You'd better believe anything you hear about Ace Justin. You bring me a note from him saying to buy, and I'll take your herd, sixty dollars a head, sight unseen. Just so they've got horns and four hoofs."

Sixty dollars a head! Dusty scratched a stubbly cheek, eyes probing Marlow. "You joshing?"

"Hell, no. I ain't had no beef to sell for two weeks. I could use most of them hundred right here in camp, and the rest in Songbird Basin. Damn it, there's a thousand miners up there working in the Bluejay, the American Belle, and the Helen of Troy, and they're mighty near out of grub."

"A thousand miners won't sit up there and starve to death while this Justin hombre keeps beef away from 'em," Dusty cried. "What kind of hogwash is this I'm getting?"

"Hogwash?" Marlow snarled. "It ain't no hogwash. I don't know what he's up to. I ain't smart like Ace Justin is."

"I'll get that note from him," Dusty said. "Where'll you be in the morning?"

"My shop's on the river side of the street across from the Gold Eagle. You'll find Justin in the Eagle." A great laugh rolled out of Marlow. "And you'll find the undertaker on down the street. Better buy your coffin now if you want one. He's got some fancy ones."

DUSTY was in the street, working his way with the traffic, the flares ahead lighting the big sign:

GOLD EAGLE
Ace Justin, Prop.

The music was a din in his ears again; the monotonous chant of the barkers a file drawn across taut nerves. If this was a boomtown where Pete and Al Chase wanted to have fun, they could have it. After this, Tailholt would look good to Dusty Eagan.

Finding a place at a hitch-pole beyond the Gold Eagle, Dusty rammed his way back along the plank walk. A shot sounded from across the street. Someone cried out in high agony. Ahead of Dusty a man spilled out of the Eagle, rolled over and sat up, shaking a fist at the bouncer. The crowd laughed and shoved him into the mud of the street.

Dusty went in with the flow of the crowd. The Gold Eagle was a huge place, lighted by expensive chandeliers swaying above him. Tables filling the right side of the room offered Dusty any game he had ever heard of and some he hadn't. A long, ornate mahogany bar ran along the left wall, a dozen aproned barmen moving with speed and efficiency to keep the crowd served. The orchestra was in the back, a small space in front of it filled with swaying couples, men's feet stomping out the miners' notion of a dance.

A percentage girl plucked at Dusty's sleeve, her red-lipped smile falling short of her eyes. "A drink, cowboy?"

He shook his head. "I want to see Ace Justin."

She shrank back, suddenly afraid. "Maybe you think you do, cowboy, but if you live long enough, you'll change your mind."

He heard her, but the words made no impression on a mind intent on the fulfillment of one objective. His eyes swept the room. Tobacco smoke filtered upward; the smell of liquor and the stink of stale sweat struck at his nostrils. Two guns roared from the midway along the bar; a swarthy, grinning man holstered his, the other was carried out, face slack in death.

"One of the Talcotts," the girl cried, plucking at Dusty's sleeve again. "Git out, cowboy. You don't want to see Ace Justin."

Again he heard her, but the words were distant, the meaning without significance. Then his heart missed a beat. At the faro table was the whip-shaped figure of Sim Spain, little red-eyed Randy beside him.

They couldn't be here. The Crossbow herd hadn't caught them. But it was true. He had seen them well enough to be sure.

Then they were gone, and there was only one explanation. Spain and Randy had circled them, following the canyon rim until they were well ahead, but what urgent business would bring them on at that rate? Again there was only one explanation. Spain wanted to see Justin before Dusty's herd reached the camp.

"A cowboy is always a special guest in Wagon Tire," a throaty voice said. "What's the matter, Sue? Couldn't you get him interested?"

The percentage girl had been no more than a shadow plucking at his coat sleeve. Dusty, swinging his gaze to the throaty-voiced one, saw that she would always be more than a shadow in any man's eyes. She was tall, the curves of breasts and hips accentuated by a low-cut, tight-fitting dress, shiny with tinsel.

Tinsel! That was it. The preacher had said it right. This was tinsel. All of it from the tall girl down through the games and liquor and the rest that could be bought here. But there was a glory of living, a glory that was as different from this false frosting as sunlight and darkness. Dusty had been living for that glory. He would not be stopped now.

The shadowy Sue drifted away. The tall girl stood close to Dusty, head cocked a little, blue eyes bright with interest. Even now, knowing what she stood for, her presence was like a drink of strong wine. There was an undefined primitive appeal about her, a sort of vibrancy as if she held the power to bring life to anything she touched.

SUDDENLY she hooked her arm through his. "Any of us can get miners by the dozen. All we have to do is flutter an eyelash, but a cowboy is something else." She was propelling him through the crowd toward the stairs that curved in a wide arc to the balcony above. "Valuable because they're hard to find."

It was a game, perhaps with Sim Spain's scheming mind behind it. This was no ordinary percentage girl. She wouldn't have come to him unless there were reasons for it, but he wanted to see Ace Justin. It might be as good a way as any, so he let himself be worked through the crowd, conscious of the closeness of her body, the expensive perfume, the pressure of her breasts as the jostling crowd threw her against him.

"I guess I ain't so rare," he said and grinned at her.

"I never saw anybody else like you." She found his hand and pressed it. "You're cute, cowboy."

It should work. It would have worked with another man who didn't have a love for Nancy Beam woven into the woof and warp of his being. But he didn't let her know about Nancy. She was putting on a good act and he'd play it through with her. He put an arm around her and she pressed closer.

"Sure sounds purty, coming off your tongue," he said. "You're the cute one, just like a yellow heifer."

"You turn a nice compliment, cowboy." They had reached the stairs and started up. "What's your name?"

"Bucky Bones. What's yours?"

She stopped and pulled away from him, her seductive manner torn from her. She asked with vicious sharpness, "Where'd you come from?"

"Cedar valley. I want to see Justin. Got some cattle to sell him."

He saw doubt tug at the corners of her red-lipped mouth. "I'm Jennifer Gale. Maybe you've heard of me."

"Why now, I sure have, but I never knew she was purty like you. Excuse me for fooling you, but it's a habit with me. I do it so girls won't like me for my money. I'm Dusty Eagan."

She was smiles again, all honey-sweet, her arm through his as they went on up the stairs. "Why, I've heard of you. You're right not to trust most women. In a camp like this you can't be too careful."

"They're sure out to skin a man, but you're different. You're good like an angel. I've never been fooled in a woman yet. Not me!"

They had reached the head of the stairs and paused in front of the first door. Her blue eyes were fixed on him. "You said you had money?"

"I will have. You'll see. Where can I find this Justin hombre?"

"This is his office, but my room's down there. Number ten. If you want to see Justin. . . ."

"I sure would like to visit your room, but that'll wait. I've got business with the big poo-paw."

She turned the knob and shoved the door open. "It's a date, Mr. Eagan."

Ace Justin sat behind a roll-top desk, a tall, skinny man with green eyes that were fever bright. He rose, and it seemed to Dusty he was seven feet tall, the way he kept coming out of his chair. He was the thinnest man Dusty had ever seen, nothing but bones and a grey-unhealthy-looking skin that covered him loosely. Ace Justin was sick unto death, but impending death subtracted from neither his greed nor ambition.

"How do you do, Mr. Eagan," Justin said in a tired tone. "I've been expecting you. Sit down."

Jennifer had closed the door. She stood against it, head bent so that her gaze never left Dusty's face. She said, "He has business with you, Ace."

"I know." Justin dropped back into his swivel chair, long fingers tipped up before him in the shape of a steeple. "He has cattle to sell a starving mining camp."

Dusty sat down and began shaping a smoke. Justin's fever-sharp eyes held a bland gall that made them hard to read. For a moment Dusty turned it over in his mind, not certain what he should do. Then, deciding the cunning game wasn't his way, he said bluntly, "I've got a hundred head west of town, but I hear the butchers won't buy until you give the word."

"That's right, friend. Who told you?"

"Marlow."

JUSTIN nodded, his face betraying no emotion. "Sit down, Jennifer. I never like to see a lady stand." For a moment the girl hesitated. He spoke more loudly this time, his tone suddenly wicked. "Sit down."

She obeyed. Dusty, taking a quick look at her, saw that she was afraid. His eyes raked the room. No one else was here. He didn't know why she'd be frightened. Ace Justin wasn't enough man to worry a baby.

"Marlow said he'd buy if you'd send him a note to go ahead." Dusty licked dry lips. Jennifer was trembling. He'd been a fool. He should have brought Pete and Chase with him. The cattle wouldn't go anywhere tonight. "Write it out for me."

Justin shook his head, lips curling into a mocking smile. "Sorry, friend. You see, it took me some time and a little trouble to get the boys in line. Marlow was stubborn, but he came around. A bullet has a wicked sound through a man's window at night. I'm not buying your cattle, Eagan, even if you had any. Your herd stampeded tonight."

Dusty came to his feet, not believing it, hand gripping gun butt. "You're lying."

"You can think what you want to," Justin breathed, "but I'm telling you your cattle are gone. My boys will gather them for me. By tomorrow you'll lose your girl and your two cowhands will be dead. Might be you will, too. You made a bad mistake coming here, Eagan."

"I'm not making a mistake now," Dusty raged and pulled his gun.

But Dusty didn't fire. The door slammed open just as his gun leveled. Justin sat motionless, mocking smile set on his lips, fingers still forming a steeple. Dusty's first thought was that he couldn't shoot a man who wouldn't draw. Then, hearing the door, he wheeled. Two swarthy men were in front, guns in their hands. Behind them Dusty glimpsed Sim Spain and Randy His second thought was that there were too many, and he was too late.

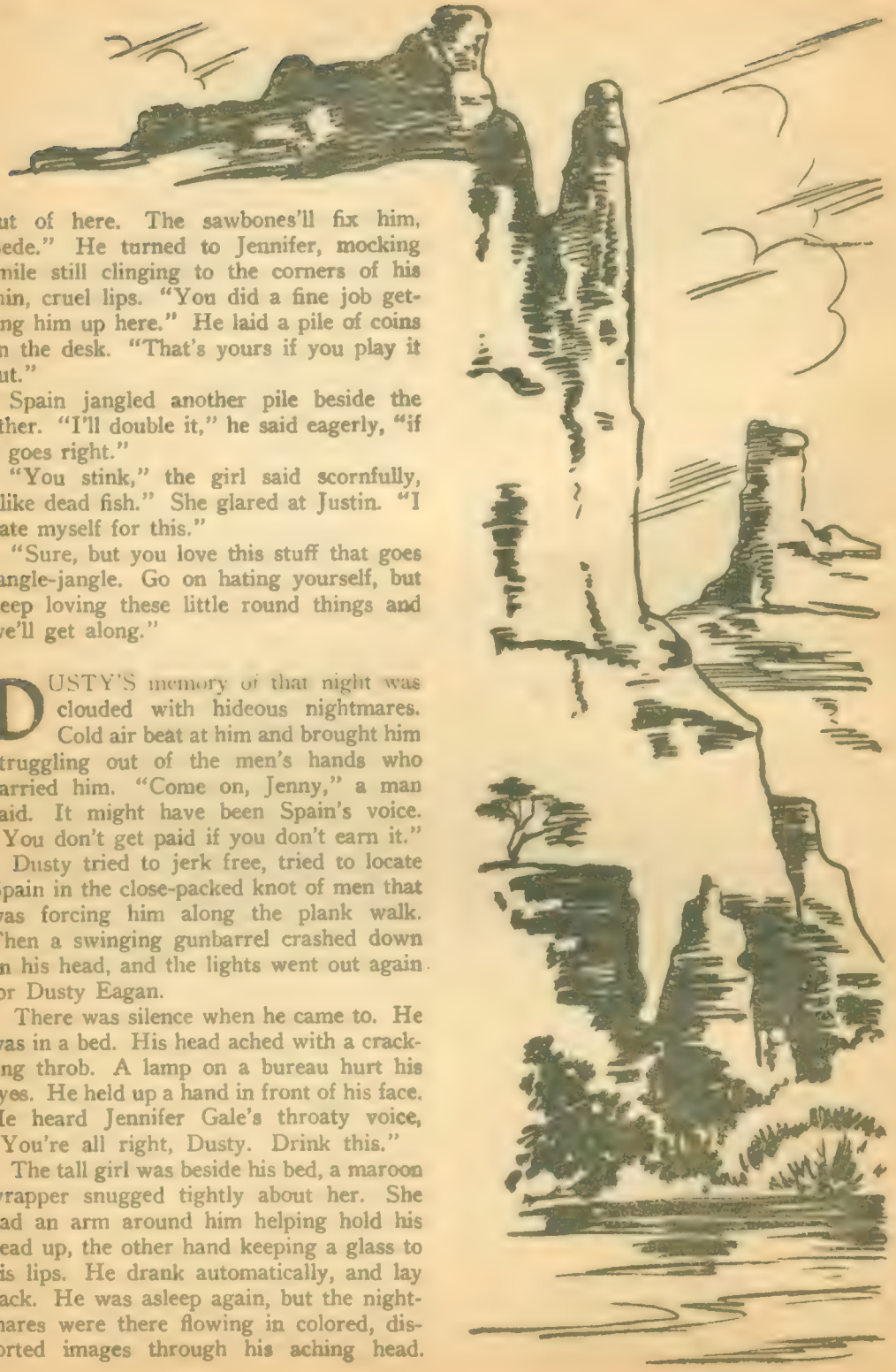
Dusty's gun roared once. He got one of the swarthy men, the bullet slicing through his chest and knocking him off his feet. Then they were on him, gunbarrels cracking him on the head and battering him to his knees. The lights were out for Dusty Eagan when Spain shouldered the swarthy man away.

"Don't kill him, you fool. I've got use for him."

"He salivated Bill," the swarthy one howled. "I'll kill him. I'll—"

"Bill ain't dead," Randy said.

Justin waved at the door. "Get him



out of here. The sawbones'll fix him, Bede." He turned to Jennifer, mocking smile still clinging to the corners of his thin, cruel lips. "You did a fine job getting him up here." He laid a pile of coins on the desk. "That's yours if you play it out."

Spain jangled another pile beside the other. "I'll double it," he said eagerly, "if it goes right."

"You stink," the girl said scornfully, "like dead fish." She glared at Justin. "I hate myself for this."

"Sure, but you love this stuff that goes jangle-jangle. Go on hating yourself, but keep loving these little round things and we'll get along."

DUSTY'S memory of that night was clouded with hideous nightmares. Cold air beat at him and brought him struggling out of the men's hands who carried him. "Come on, Jenny," a man said. It might have been Spain's voice. "You don't get paid if you don't earn it."

Dusty tried to jerk free, tried to locate Spain in the close-packed knot of men that was forcing him along the plank walk. Then a swinging gunbarrel crashed down on his head, and the lights went out again for Dusty Eagan.

There was silence when he came to. He was in a bed. His head ached with a crackling throb. A lamp on a bureau hurt his eyes. He held up a hand in front of his face. He heard Jennifer Gale's throaty voice, "You're all right, Dusty. Drink this."

The tall girl was beside his bed, a maroon wrapper snugged tightly about her. She had an arm around him helping hold his head up, the other hand keeping a glass to his lips. He drank automatically, and lay back. He was asleep again, but the nightmares were there flowing in colored, distorted images through his aching head.

He'd lost his girl. His herd had stampeded. Pete and Al Chase were dead. He'd made a mistake coming here. The worst mistake of his life.

There were the devils. All of them. Prodding him with red-hot pitchforks. Beating him on the head with gunbarrels. Whip-shaped Sim Spain. Red-eyed Randy. The swarthy Talcotts. Skinny, sick Ace Justin who kept calling out commands in a smooth voice.

He was in a rough, one-room cabin. It was broad daylight when he woke. He sat up and rubbed a hand across his forehead, trying to remember and slowly picking up the thread. It came back, sweeping in a paralyzing flood tide through his mind. This was the day he got married. He had to sell his herd. Marlow would take them, but he had to have a note from Justin. Only Justin wouldn't give it. Justin said he didn't have a herd. It had stampeded. So he couldn't marry Nancy. And then they'd hit him.

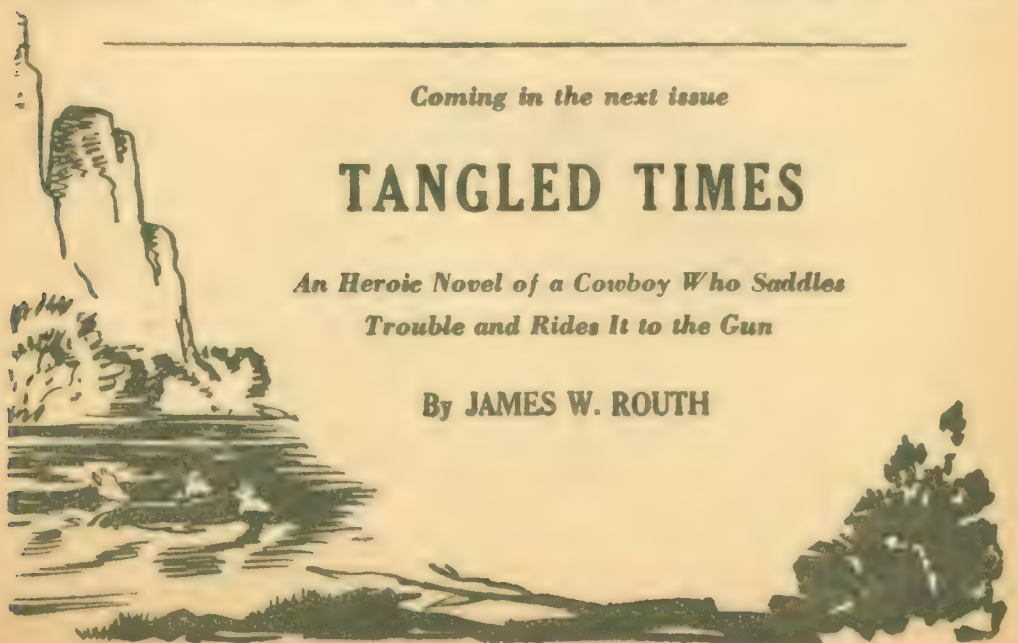
Dusty got up, grabbing at a rough pine table until the wave of dizziness left. It was in the middle of the morning. He had to see Nancy. Tell her what had happened. Had to find Pete and Al Chase. The cattle could be picked up. The next time he went after Justin things would be different.

HE DRESSED, buckled on his gunbelt, and checked his Colt. He wondered why they had left it in its holster. Justin and Spain would know he'd come after them. But Randy and Talcott would be in the way. They'd kill him, all fine and legal if he had a gun in his hand, and safer than throwing his body into the river or running him out of town and wondering if he'd come back.

Dusty stepped out of the cabin into the sun's glare, blinking for a moment, puzzled as he tried to place where he was. Then, with a shock of recognition, he saw that he was in front of Hawkin's house. The cabin where he'd spent the night was beside it.

A premonition of total disaster slid along his spine. He waded through the sucking mud to the preacher's door and knocked. It swung open. Abner Hawkins stood there, face long and more solemn even than it had been last night. From a back room Dusty heard a woman crying. Nancy!

"I want to see her." Dusty tried to push past the preacher, but Hawkins struck him, knocking him out of the doorway and almost off his feet. He stumbled in the mud, regained his balance, and grabbed for his gun. Then his hand fell away, for Hawkins held a shotgun on the ready,



Coming in the next issue

TANGLED TIMES

An Heroic Novel of a Cowboy Who Saddles Trouble and Rides It to the Gun

By JAMES W. ROUTH

hammer back. "What kind of a preacher are you?" Dusty cried.

"I'm the best preacher I can be," Hawkins said in cold contempt. "I may be a poor one, but I'm enough man to keep you from seeing the woman you wronged."

"Wronged!" The word was jolted out of Dusty. "What in hell are you talking about? I never wronged any woman, you damned, slick-tongued gospel howler."

Hawkins was not a man to let temper rule him. He said in that same contemptuous voice, "I am sure of one thing, Eagan, whatever doubts I may have about the others. You have no right to see her."

Dusty pressed back into the doorway. He found it hard to breathe. His heart was sending a wild pulse beating through his veins. He said thickly. "You ain't the one to tell me what rights I've got."

"Haven't you done enough without keeping on punishing her?"

Dusty scrubbed a hand across his face. This must be another nightmare. He said, "Maybe you can tell me what I've done."

"I don't know why I should recite a man's crimes, but if you want to hear them, I will. First you got roaring drunk. Then you killed Nancy's father in the Gold Eagle after a quarrel over her. Finally you forgot her enough to spend the night in the next cabin with Jennifer Gale."

Dusty touched dry lips with his tongue. So this was it. Sim Spain's scheming mind and Jennifer Gale had done the job. He dipped into his hazy memory of the tortured night. He remembered the drink. She had been there beside his bed, wearing a wrapper.

"How do you know all this?"

"Nancy's foreman, a man named Spain, came to tell her this morning. He said he had been hunting for her since Mr. Beam was killed. While he was here, he told her where you were last night. Nancy didn't believe it, but after he left, we saw the Gale woman walk boldly back to town. She was wearing a nightgown with a wrapper around it. I went to the cabin. You were on the bed snoring like a drunken man."

Dusty lifted his gun and checked it again. "Did you or Nancy see Windy's body?"

"No, but Spain brought his hat with a bullet hole through it, and his gold watch and wallet."

Dusty dropped the gun back into its casing, his eyes lifted to the preacher's. "Hawkins, I figger you're honest but you're a damned fool for believing that hogwash. I'd tell you what did happen if you'd believe it. You won't, but there is one thing you'd sure as hell better do. Tell Nancy it ain't the way she heard it."

SWINGING away from the preacher's house, Dusty waded the mud of the path along the street until he reached the plank walk. He thought of what Hawkins had said last night. A man must live by certain standards. That was the glory of living. This tawdry street before him, ruled by Ace Justin, crowded by log cabins and false-fronted buildings, paintless, almost deserted now, drab and uninviting, robbing men by playing upon the worst elements in their nature—this was the tinsel.

Dusty Eagan knew exactly what had to be done. Ace Justin must die. Sim Spain must die. And Jennifer Gale must tell Nancy Beam that it was a lie about him.

He had almost reached the Gold Eagle before he saw Pete and Al Chase loitering in front. Pete let out a great squall and Chase took off his derby and scratched his head.

"I'll be damned," Chase bawled. "You're harder to kill than ten batches of kittens."

There was no smile on Dusty's taciturn face. He said, "Where's the herd?"

"Scattered to hell-an'-gone," Chase said, sobering. "They'd just got bedded down when a bunch hit us, shooting and hollering, and them cows took down the canyon like they was going home to dinner. Me and Pete burned some powder, tagged a couple of 'em, and next thing we knew they was headed back to town."

"Why didn't you go after the cows?" Dusty demanded.

"First place it was dark," Chase answered. "We didn't know how far they'd gone. Second place, Crossbow will pick 'em up. They were just below us a piece." He scratched his head, eyes searching Dusty's

face. "Third place we figgered you was in trouble. Been looking all night for you. Found your roan on the street."

"We knew damned well you wouldn't go off and leave him if you wasn't in trouble," Pete added.

He had no right to censure them for not going after the herd. Besides, there was Nancy to think of. "Yeah, trouble," Dusty muttered. "I was in some all right. Still am. So are you. Ace Justin allows you boys are about done living."

Pete snorted. "Now who in hell is Ace Justin?"

Dusty told them what had happened. "Reckon they aimed to get you last night."

"Or when we got into town," Chase said. "We did a little nosing around, and a few hardcases, Justin's I reckon, started talking fight. We gave 'em some. Now Justin ain't got so many hardcases."

Dusty rubbed a hand across his forehead. "You boys ain't in this. Rob your bank and slope out of town."

"Ain't seen a bank that looks promising," Pete grunted. "But Justin now. If he's the big wheel on this range, he'd have a safe chuck full of stuff we could use."

"That'll wait." Chase threw a glance along the street. "I don't like the notion of standing here. Be like shooting ducks on a lake. We've got some thinking to do. Let's go inside."

"This is Justin's place—" Dusty began.

"Then that's fine." Chase swung toward the batwings. "Come on."

There was a gloomy dankness about the interior of the big saloon that oppressed Dusty. The orchestra dais was deserted. One poker game was being played sleepily at a front table; the other tables were deserted. Three drunks lolled at the end of the bar. The one bleary-eyed apron behind the mahogany put down his towel and gave them a fishy stare. He asked, "What'll it be?"

"Beer," Chase said, and the others nodded.

Pete turned his back to the bar, eyes sweeping the rooms along the balcony. "Justin's office up there?"

"First room at the head of the stairs," Dusty said.

"No use wasting time on this," Pete murmured. He reached for his gun. "Let's go up there and ventilate his hide. Chances are Spain's around. We'll drill some holes in him, too."

"Turn around, you fool," Chase grated. "Keep your hand away from your iron. You think they don't know we're here?"

"How do you know they—" Pete began.

"They knew we'd be in last night," Chase explained with a poor pretense at patience. "They set up a trigger trap, figgering it was safer here than rooting us out in the dark, but it didn't work right. Now Justin will figger we'll try for him soon as we find Dusty. The minute we go up those stairs, we'll meet some hot lead."

PETE growled an oath. "I sure would like to see what he's got in his safe."

"Look," Dusty grated. "This is my ruckus. No call for you boys to keep—"

"Shut up," Chase said testily. "I told you the day you saved my hide in Tailholt that we was together from then on."

"Must be someway to get up to that balcony besides them stairs," Pete mused. "Mebbe there's a stairs coming up from the back."

"That'll wait," Chase muttered. "I said we had some thinking to do."

"I'm trying to do some thinking," Pete said defensively. "Once I get figgered out how to catch this Justin hombre in my sights—"

"Anybody can do that," Chase broke in, "but not just anybody can fix it up with Nancy. I didn't give Spain credit for as much brains as he's showed on this deal."

"If she's gonna think that of me," Dusty said bitterly, "maybe I'd better ride on."

"We'll crack that hombre's safe first," Pete growled. "Now maybe if we got on the roof—"

"If you don't shut up, I'll shut you up." Chase laid a hand on gun butt. "Don't open that mug of your's till you get an idea about Nancy."

"All right, all right," Pete grunted, "but what's got you playing cupid like this?"

Chase ran a finger along the bar, pretending he hadn't heard.

"I'm wondering the same," Dusty breathed. "There's a passel of things I don't savvy. Why did Spain figger you were the one to start on when they got the hanging notion? How did Pete come to ride in when he did? How'd you know Nancy would show up at the cabin the night they tackled us?"

"Plumb full of questions, ain't you?" Chase twisted a smoke, uncertainty tugging at him. Then he made up his mind. "All right, Dusty. I'll tell you how it was. No secret 'bout you and Nancy and what Beam thought of it. Likewise there's no secret 'bout your stiff-necked pride. Claiming you wouldn't let Nancy come to live in your cabin till you fixed it up when all the time she was loving you so much she'd have gone to live with you anywhere."

Temper began to build in Dusty. "You're blowing out a lot of wind not to be saying nothing."

"I met up with Nancy on the mesa one day," Chase went on as if he hadn't heard. "We got to talking, me saying you were the only decent man in the country. Everybody else treated me like I was pizen. That was when I got the notion of sending for Pete. Then I jumped Spain one night in Tailholt, telling him I'd drill him if he worked Nancy into a wedding. That was when he told me to get out of the country, but I'm kind of stubborn that way. I didn't go."

For the first time in his life Dusty Eagan realized how far from being alone he was. He'd treated Al Chase like a neighbor, and the investment in friendship was paying back high interest.

"Mebbe you don't savvy something else," Chase added, "folks claiming I'm a tough hand. Mebbe so, only I ain't so tough 'bout some things. I was like you when I was your age, stubborn, stiff-necked, saying I was gonna have a palace for my girl afore I married her. I set out to make my pile the easy way. While I was gone she got married. Been making it the easy way ever since, ducking and hiding and wondering if the lawman in the next town knew how many places wanted me."

"You're making me cry," Pete growled. "I've been thinking. Nancy would believe that Jennifer gal, mebbe, if she loves you as much as she's been letting on. I say to go after Jennie. Take her to the preacher's house. Make her talk."

"Sure, I thought of that," Chase said scornfully. "Only her room's up there, too. That's all they want us to do. Just start up them stairs."

"This is a hell of a note," Pete said angrily. "Sooner or later Justin and the girl's gonna come down, but I never did cotton to just standing around."

"I'll smoke 'em out," Dusty said and wheeled out of the saloon.

For an instant Pete's and Al Chase's eyes locked. Then Chase nodded and the two of them followed Dusty into the sunlight.

MARLOW was in his butcher shop, idling behind the bare counter, a cigar stub tucked into the corner of his mouth. He grinned sourly when he recognized Dusty. "I've got the money if you've got the note from Justin."

Dusty jerked a thumb at the door. "We've got other business now. When we wind this up, you won't be asking for no note from Justin."

"I won't, eh? Mebbe you want to swap smoke with the Talcotts and the rest of Justin's toughs."

"Mebbe. Come on."

But the butcher didn't move. "I ain't going nowhere till I know where I'm going."

"You're yellow just like the rest of 'em, kowtowing around to a scheming devil who's got enough money to hire a few gunslingers." Dusty waved a hand around the nearly empty shop. "Look at that. One side of bacon and a couple of hams, and down the river I've got a hundred head waiting to be butchered."

"I'll wait till I see that smoke swapping," Marlow said doggedly.

"You're coming now." Dusty's gun was in his hand, his face as bleak as the granite peaks walling the mining camp. "Move."

Marlow looked at Dusty, then at Chase and Pete in the doorway. "All right," he said hoarsely, "but don't get me into no fight."

Dusty followed Marlow into the street, gun prodding him in the back, and nodded at the fire bell. "Over there."

They ducked around a rumbling ore wagon, wading the mud of the street that had been churned into a deep mire by innumerable wheels and hoofs.

"What's the play?" Chase asked.

"Give that rope a yank," Dusty said. "I'm aiming to tell the boys in this town a few things."

The bell's metallic clang rolled into the morning quiet. Men tumbled out of stores and saloons, yelling, "Where's the fire?"

Still Chase pulled the rope and the crowd began knotting around the pole frame that held the bell. Marlow licked dry lips, his cigar gone cold in his mouth. He muttered, "I don't like this, cowboy."

Dusty held his silence, the crowd growing, growling a little because they couldn't see any smoke and no one seemed to know what it was about. Fingers wrapped around gun butt, Dusty's eyes searched the crowd, but he couldn't see Spain or Randy or the swarthy Talcott.

"All right, Al." Dusty held up a hand and when the last metallic echo had died and the crowd had quieted, he called, "There ain't no fire, but I'm aiming to light one under Ace Justin. You know you can't buy fresh meat. The butchers tell you they can't get any. None raised around here. That's a damned lie. I'm aiming for you to know the truth. We brought a hundred head up the river." He swung a hand toward Chase and Pete. "I came in ahead to sell 'em. Marlow, tell these people why you didn't buy."

Marlow's face had lost its color. He chewed fiercely on his cigar, eyes searching the crowd. Dusty's gun prodded his back. "Tell 'em, damn you," he snarled.

"We've been organized by Justin." Marlow swallowed. "He said we'd work together. We'd control all food supplies for the camp this winter so we could charge higher prices." He swallowed again and when he spoke, his voice cracked with the tension of fear. "I kicked. I got a bullet through my window at night. Missed my head by a foot. I didn't do no more kicking."

THE GROWL that rose from the crowd started as a low rumble and increased in tempo until it was an infuriated roar washing out of a hundred throats. Miners. Business men. Prospectors. A few Easterners, but all knew that fresh meat could not be bought, that winter was close and then the camp would be locked between the granite peaks until spring.

"You gonna starve so Justin can rob you?" Dusty bellowed. "You gonna let a few toughs ram Justin's crooked deal down your throat?"

"Look out," Marlow bawled. "They're coming."

It had smoked them out as Dusty had known it would. Justin couldn't hold back while a mob was lashed into a killing temper. The swarthy Talcott, whip-shaped Sim Spain, the little killer Randy, and a dozen more. Justin's toughs. Every hardcase he'd gathered to keep his grip on the boom camp, and Spain and Randy were backing his play, maybe because Spain's interest was Justin's interest, or maybe because this gave Spain his chance to kill Dusty Eagan.

Justin's crew spilled out of the Gold Eagle and into the street. They charged through the mud to the fire bell, Talcott howling for the mob to break. It did, like dry snow before a hard wheeling wind. Not one stood to fight, the furious anger of a moment before killed by the sight of Justin's gun-slinging toughs.

Chase and Pete were the first to drop hammer. Then lead slashed out from Talcott and Spain and the rest, and Dusty's Colt was adding its roar to the thunder. There, in the mud of Wagon Tire's street, the battle was fought to its bloody end. It was brief and terrible. There was no quarter, no running. Men fell and died and blood spurted its crimson flood into the mire.

The false fronts threw back the prolonged echoes of the gunfire. A man cried out, high and strained with the agony of death. Bodies lay still. Hands gripped mud, squeezed it between fingers in those last fateful minutes until life had fled.

Spain was the first to fall. Randy went down under Al Chase's gun. Talcott was

next with Dusty's bullet between his eyes. It broke the back of Justin's power there in that first blast. Then Dusty's legs were knocked out from under him. He fell full out, vaguely aware that Pete was down, that Chase was bending as if strength was flowing out of him, but both guns were still in his hands, working with fatal accuracy.

Dusty lifted his face from the mud, brushed it away with a swipe of his hand, and tilting his gun upward, squeezed trigger. There were other guns, behind him, beside him, across the street, and Justin's men were being flattened like grain stalks before a sickle's flashing blade. Wagon Tire was making its fight at last.

Courage was here in Justin's men, raw, blind courage that was worthy of a better cause. In the end Ace Justin could not stay inside the protective walls of the saloon and see his hired army smashed. Once they were gone, there would be a rope for him. He stepped out of the Gold Eagle, two guns in his clawlike hands, and died before Abner Hawkins' shotgun. The preacher, pacing along the plank walk, let go the instant Justin came into view.

Dusty didn't understand it. He saw Hawkins stop when Justin fell, heard Marlow bawl, "That does it." Then his numbed mind began to grasp what had happened. The crowd had scattered with the appearance of Justin's men just as Justin had known it would, but he had made one fatal mistake. He hadn't foreseen that Dusty and Pete and Al Chase would hold their ground and take the terrible toll they had.

MEN WERE lifting Dusty from the mud. He knew that his left leg wouldn't hold him, felt the blood rushing down from his thigh. Hawkins came up to him then. He said with deep humility, "I know a man who had the courage it took to do this would not do the things I believed you had. You're hard hit, Eagan. Let them take you to my house."

"Jennifer Gale," Dusty muttered. "I've got to find her. She's got to tell Nancy it isn't true."

"I'll get her," Hawkins said.

Pete was dead. Dusty knew that without looking at him. A twisted form, face down in the mud, hands outstretched as if reaching for a dropped gun. Chase was still alive. He was smiling when Dusty looked at him, his face wiped clean of the bitterness that had so long been in him. He said softly, "Make her a good husband, boy. There ain't no sense in living like me and Pete did. Alone and running. Don't fret none about us. Sort of balances the books, cashing in this way."

The medico was there at Hawkins's house. Nancy came hurrying along the muddy path to him, crying a little. Before she reached him, he called, "It ain't true, Nancy, what they told you. . . ."

"I know, Dusty," she breathed.

He didn't faint. He never fully lost consciousness. They put him to bed, and he heard the doctor mutter, "Lost a lot of blood. Got to stay quiet." He slept then. It was evening when he woke. He rubbed his eyes. There was a lamp on the little pine table. He rubbed his eyes again. Jennifer Gale was sitting on the other side of the lamp.

Jennifer rose when she saw he was awake. "I'll get Nancy," she said.

They came in a moment later, the two of them, Jennifer in a low-cut spangled dress, Nancy still in her shirt and levis and riding boots. Shame was a sickness in Jennifer; courage a bright red light shining on Nancy. There it was, Dusty thought, the tinsel and the glory.

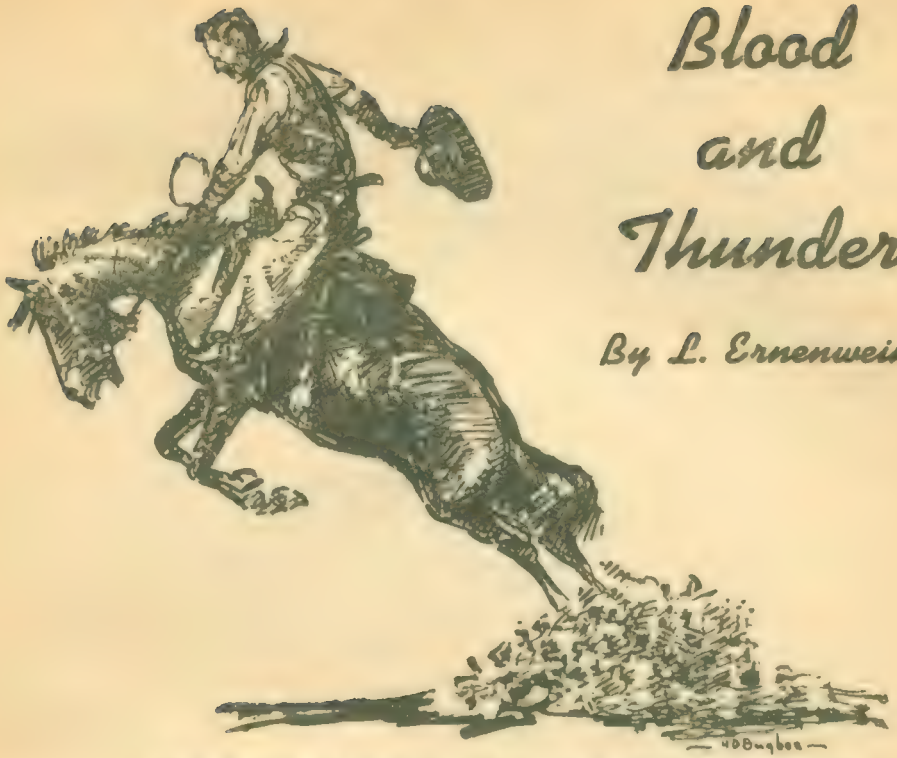
"Dad isn't dead," Nancy whispered. "Jennifer saved his life. He was beaten and shot, but he'll live. He said to tell you he knows he was wrong, Dusty. He wants you to help him run Crossbow. He was afraid of Spain, and after Randy and the others came, Dad couldn't get rid of him. He's glad Spain's dead."

Windy Beam wanting Dusty Eagan's help. Well, now, that was a queer one. He reached for Nancy, and she stooped and kissed him.

"I hope we'll have twin boys," Nancy breathed. "We'll name them Al and Pete."

Blood and Thunder

By L. Ernenwein



"For a plug of tobacco and to show 'em I could do it"

Though sheriffing is his business, Ace Gardner would rather talk about racehorses than badmen

SURE," Ace Gardner said, "I'll tell you about some blood and thunder. But it may not be the kind you're expectin' to hear."

A medium-sized, strong-muscled man garbed in the cowboy clothes he's always worn, Deputy Sheriff Gardner of Coolidge, Arizona, has toted a law badge for upwards of 30 years, off and on. He's had his share of excitement, corralling cow thieves and bank robbers, yet he would rather talk about boyhood experiences at old-time Texas race tracks.

"I've had to shoot to kill," he said, and frowned as if recalling scenes that didn't please him. "But it's not a thing a man likes to talk about."

Then a smile traced laugh lines around his keen, sunpuckered eyes, and he said: "The blood and thunder I referred to is a horse, the fastest horse I ever rode. His blood was the best in Texas and there was plenty thunder when he came roaring down that racetrack. His name was Traveler."

Ace, who was born on his father's A Cross Ranch in Tom Green County, Texas, rode his first race 56 years ago. "Times have changed a lot since then. We had no fancy-padded stall gates for starting races in those days. It was lap and tap—scratch gravel and bust the breeze. But one thing hasn't changed much, and that's the good blood that's still thundering down the stretch at racetracks today. The same blood and thunder I straddled over 50 years ago."

Horses were the predominant interest of Gardner's boyhood, and he's still "fooling around" with horses, among them a coming two-year-old filly that looks like she might develop into a topnotcher.

"My daddy was a real brush-track man," Ace explains. "I mean he would race you for money or marbles, or the house over his head. He always had a runner or two in the barn, and most times they could win, barring accidents. Dad had a way of trainin' horses and tellin' when a pony was ready to pop his best speed. Then he'd start bettin' and wouldn't stop till his pocket was empty. I remember one time he bet a big bunch of purebred cows on a match race that we sure wouldn't of wanted to lose."

Incredible as it seems, Ace Gardner rode his first race at the age of six. "I weighed around 50 pounds and had my stirrups tied down so's I wouldn't lose 'em," Gardner recalled. "I don't remember if I was scared or not, but I sure wanted to win and did my damnedest to boot that old pony in first.

"That was at Pan Flat Ranch, Texas, and I rode a horse named Monkey against Anderson Brothers' bay gelding, Kid. We run to a dead heat. It wasn't Monkey's fault, exactly, nor mine neither. You see he'd got his muzzle off during the night before the race and ate so much of his beddin' he swelled up like a poisoned pup. A horse just can't run his best if he's been fed or watered shortly before a race."

Afterward, when Monkey was right, he beat the Kid by open daylight. "Monkey wasn't much to look at, bein' smallish and shaggy as a shepherd dog, but he sure could git up and go. I rode him in 22 match races altogether and never got beat."

ASKED if it didn't take considerable sharpness and the occasional use of nefarious scheming to win races in those days, Gardner admitted grinningly that it did. "They sure showed us country boys a lot of shady tricks, and you had to keep your eyes peeled all the time or you'd lose your shirt bettin' against some ringer that looked like he couldn't outrun a fat man on foot.

"I remember one racing trip I took with my brother, who was probably the ugliest man who ever lived and one of the smartest when it came to promotin' a match race. We would camp out in the brush near a town, and he'd fix up a match, acting like he was just a big green farmer from the cotton country and intended to ride Monkey himself. Sometimes he'd make out like he was drunk and dim-witted, until the match was made and the money was up. Then, come time for the race, I'd arrive to do the riding. Sometimes the other owner would squawk like a stuck hog, but there was nothin' he could do about it, for no mention had been made of riders, one way or the other."

Riding the famous Traveler gave Gardner his greatest thrill as a jockey. "There was a racehorse!" he declared with a prideful glint in his eyes. "The best of the bunch when it came to runnin' a quarter mile."

That was way back in the days when Sweetwater, Midland and San Angelo were the big-time tracks of the Southwest, when fortunes changed hands in the few seconds it took the fastest horses to run a quarter.

"A dollar was a dollar in those days," Gardner reminded. "It was worth five or six, compared to what a dollar will buy now. And a horse had to be a real race horse to win."

Which, he declared, Traveler was—"in every sense of the word. Nobody seems to know much about the old pony's past before he came to the races. According to common gossip Traveler worked in a grading camp until he was eight years old. But wherever he came from, there's no doubt in my mind that he had thoroughbred blood in his veins, and there's plenty of proof that it was potent.

"Traveler stood about fourteen and a half hands, was a light chestnut color with a white streak in his face, and he could start fast as a jackrabbit. Like I said, we didn't have stallgates back in the Nineties. It was lap and tap, or ask and answer."

In lap and tap starts each horse had to be lapped on the other when they came down to the starting line. Then, if the official starter was satisfied that each entry would get a fair break, he would shout: "Go!"

Ask and answer starts, used entirely in match races, were up to the jockeys, one asking if the other was ready. If the answer was "yes," they would break at that instant; if "no," they'd turn their horses and score again. Another method was for the two owners to stand at the starting pole, holding hands as their respective horses came up to the line. If one owner was satisfied with the alignment of the horses he would ask: "All right?" If, or when, the other owner thought his horse had an equal chance he would squeeze the other's hand, whereupon the first owner would shout: "Go!"

GARDNER, who trailed 23 head of horses from Texas to Arizona in 1898, admits that the Southwest has become a trifle crowded since he first traveled across it. The trip took two months, and was made by way of Horsehead Crossing on the Pecos, through Las Cruces to Lordsburg, up the San Simon Valley to old Fort Bowie, and ended at the Riggs Ranch in the Chiricahua Mountains. "It's sure changed a lot in those 47 years," Ace said, "but like the Chamber of Commerce says—Arizona has the same Three C's it had in the old days: cattle, copper and climate."

Although Gardner didn't have much to say about his several narrow escapes during gunfights while toting a law badge, his wife produced newspaper clippings which substantiate her claim that "Ace has had his share of close shaves." One item told how he helped corral four desperate horse thieves near Palo Verde on the Colorado River. . . .

"We were horseback," Ace recalls, "and riding through the thickest brush you ever saw. About the only way you could look was straight up. We trailed those jiggers into a slough near the river and were almost on top of 'em before we knew it. Yeah, there was some shootin', but the only scratch I got was when a bullet cut a branch so close to my face that I couldn't dodge it. The horse thieves surrendered after one of them was wounded."

Another time Gardner and a companion trailed two bank robbers named Green and Case across the desert from Blythe to Holt-

He helped corral desperate horse thieves near Palo Verde

ville, a distance of 125 miles, and cornered them in the Franklin Hotel, recovering a bank sack which contained $5,000.

During his career as a cowboy Ace was a top-hand bronc-rider, winning contest events which were rough-and-tumble affairs when compared with present day rodeo. He won a bronc-riding contest at Nogales in 1903 on a bad bucker called Dipper Sorrel. He also rode the notorious Naco Black at the Greene Cananea Cattle Company

"We won by almost half a length"

ranch in 1902 "for a plug of tobacco and to show 'em I could do it."

Gardner grinned, recalling that experience. "Naco Black was one of them outlaw horses the ranchers used to keep for a quick cure of braggy cowboys who thought they was sure-enough bronc-stompers," he explained. "Many a jaw-waggin' cowpoke got cured of his buckaroo notions by Naco. He pitched hard for better'n 200 yards, going as far up each time as he'd go ahead. We didn't ride to a time limit, or have pickup men in those days. We just rode till we got piled, or till the bronc go too tired to pitch. Then it was over."

Ace was foreman of the old 3 C Ranch near Calexico on the Mexican Border when he met the girl who became Mrs Gardner in 1904. "She's still with me," he said, smiling at his cheerful wife who shares a home well stocked with pictures and keepsakes of long ago. Included among the latter are 62 guns, ranging from long-barreled rusty rifles to derringers. A .45-70 with an octagon barrel was used at Yuma Prison during a revolt. A scattergun, double-barreled and 10-guage, once belonged to the bandit, Billy Styles. There is also a massive ball and chain of the type used on prisoners, the ball weighing about 100 pounds and being attached to a three-foot chain with a leg-shackle at the other end.

Asked if he had ever met up with any famous outlaws, Ace admitted that he had known Bert Alvord, "who was dark as the inside of a boot," and Billy Styles, "a little feller who looked more like a college boy than a bandit." According to Gardner's way of thinking they were just a couple of misguided cowpokes who thought they could come by easy money with a mask and gun—and lived to learn that it was the hardest money they ever made.

Blackjack Ketchum was another notorious bandit Ace knew personally. "But that was back in Texas before Tom went outlaw," Gardner explained. "He stopped by our ranch one evening while my mother was doctorin' me on account of a thorn that had festered my foot and was hurtin' like all gitout. Ma said if she only had some of that good salve from the Mercantile in town she could cure my misery. Tom Ketchum heard her say it. He climbed into saddle and rode a 30 mile round trip on the coldest night of the winter to get that salve. And he brought me a jew's-harp to sort of take my mind off what was ailin' me."

This is the same Blackjack Ketchum who was later hung, and because of an overly long drop from the gallows was beheaded by the force of his huge body falling so far. . . .

But it is Traveler that Ace likes to remember. "I sure liked that old pony, and I'll never forget the day I rode him at Ozona, Texas, in 1896," he reflected. "It was a match race with Bill Moore's grey gelding, Skinny, ridden by a jockey named Nixon. There was a lot of money up—too much for us to lose. Skinny, which was by Joe Collins, was a runnin' fool, and it was nip and tuck all the way. Looked like he might beat us, too, the race bein' at 220 yards, which wasn't Traveler's best distance. Nixon was whippin' his horse at every jump. I didn't use a whip on Traveler; just hand-rode him like my daddy had taught me, and hollered at him. But that old stud closed faster'n a cat crossin' a hot griddle, and we won by almost half a length."

Gardner doesn't remember the time for that race, but he does recall that Traveler was 14 years old. The famous stallion's fastest time, according to Ace, was recorded by three stop watches at San Angelo in 1895 when he ran a quarter-mile in 2¾ seconds. . . .

"That's bustin' the breeze," Ace declared. "Traveler made such a name for himself that it finally got so no one would run a horse against him. But he did more than win races. He was the foundation sire of such horses as Texas Chief, Little Joe, Possum and Blue Eyes. There's one of his descendants right here in Arizona today—Joe Reid 2nd, owned by Bert Wood. Joe Reid 2nd goes back five generations to Traveler and is recognized as one of the best quarterhouse studs in the country. So old Traveler's blood is still thunderin' down racetracks, toted by his descendants."

Ace Gardner chuckled, shaking hands, and said: "That's my favorite kind of blood and thunder."

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. How many strands in the rope corral in which the saddle remuda is gathered and held on a roundup?

2. Why are most cattle brands smaller now than in the old days of the open range?

3. In the Pecos Valley, once the cattle kingdom of John S. Chisum, many modern farms are irrigated by water which flows from the wells without pumping. What are such wells called?

4. When you hear a cowboy of the Rocky Mountains speak of "quakies," what is he talking about?

5. What is the raised rear end of a saddle called?

6. The old-time buffalo hunter had a two-word slang name for his long barreled rifle. The first word was "long." Long what?

7. When a cowboy says he had a steer Texas tied, what does he mean?

8. In old-time cowboy slang was it complimentary or otherwise to refer to a man as "a long rider"?

9. What are spotted horses often called besides Appaloosas?

10. Mount Borah, 12,655 feet, is the highest mountain in what rugged Western state?

——*Rattlesnake Robert*

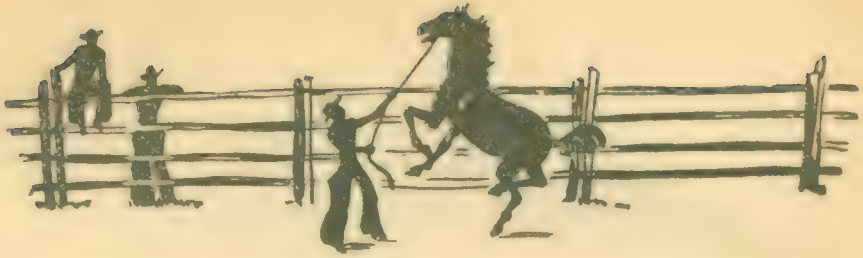
You will find the answers to these questions on page 95. **Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total score is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.**

Love, Honor and a Bay

By S. Omar Barker

"Shame on you, Bronc!" she cried. "Give me that gun!"

EVEN THOUGH he was practically a stranger, Tibb gave orders to a guy to keep away from his own girl—and she didn't seem to mind



YOU CAN plan it all out, but you never know. Tall Tibb Hart had finally got himself hog-tied to the idea that a trip back to his old home in Missouri would be good medicine. Not that there was any inch of his saddle-lean body sick. He used the phrase "good medicine" as the Indians did, simply to mean that after studying it over the idea seemed favorable. Having drawn his time at the Bar U and spent some weeks looking around for a good watering place to file on, without finding one to suit him, he figured he might as well make the trip "back East" now, while he was footloose.

His own parents were dead, and all the folks he had back there were some aunts, uncles and cousins that he was fond of, all right, but never wrote to. He never wrote to Marybelle Hicks, either, but he supposed she was still there. He had taken to liking Marybelle pretty well when he was around fourteen and she was a plump, dimpled little squidget about the same. That was just before he got his chance to throw in with an emigrant family and come West to be a cowboy. Tibb Hart couldn't help wondering if she had grown up pretty and still had those dimples. Lately, in fact, he had got to wondering pretty hard about it.

He happened to ride into San Hilario on a morning when the Tea Kettle outfit was shipping cattle. He'd had it in mind first to see if he could sell his horse and store his saddle at the livery stable, then go to the bank and cash the accumulated Bar U pay check he still carried. After that he aimed to go down to the depot, buy a ticket and catch the next train east.

But when he saw cow dust rising from the loading pens half a mile on beyond the sunburned, scattered buildings of San Hilario, he rode out there instead. Maybe there would be a chance to catch the caboose and go to town with the cattle, thus saving train fare as far as K. C.

On his way out of town he saw a girl in a red-checkered sunbonnet trying to chouse a frisky milk-pen calf out of a garden patch. The spry and limber way she lifted her long skirts and whooped around after the cavorting calf sort of caught the cowboy's eye. By the time he rode over to the fence to offer to help her, she already had the calf back in its corral and was wiring the gate shut.

She looked up in surprise, her face rosy from exertion, her pert little nose shiny with sweat. Shiny or not, it was a pretty nose. At least it looked pretty to Tibb Hart. So did the rest of her face, including the promise of a dimple if she smiled. The look in her velvet brown eyes was a little abashed and inquiring.

"I see I got here too late to do you any good," said Tibb, with only the hint of a grin. "But any time you match a foot race, let me know and I'll bet on you!"

It seemed to him that the girl's eyes studied him longer than was really necessary. That—or something—made him feel pleasantly uncomfortable.

"You're a stranger to me, sir," she said primly and went into the house.

The stock train was already loaded but still on the siding when Tibb got out there. The Bar U where Tibb had worked lay two hundred miles south of San Hilario, the Tea Kettle nearly as far northwest. He didn't see anybody in the crew that he knew, but he spotted the foreman talking

to the freight conductor beside the loading ramp and moseyed over there.

"Howdy," said the foreman, his tone friendly but inquiring.

Tibb Hart was no hand to beat about the bush.

"Name's Hart," he said. "Used to ride for the Bar U. Kansas City bound. You got room for another caboose rider to help 'tend these cattle?"

The foreman looked him over. "You mean just for a free ride?"

"That's right—an' I won't require no train fare back."

The foreman scratched his head. "You don't look like a man that's runnin' from the sheriff," he said finally. "Jess didn't much want to go no way, an' it'll save me a hand I can use on the ranch. You ready to roll?"

"I got my horse an' saddle to hang up somewheres," said Tibb, nodding toward the train. "How soon's she pullin' out?"

"Ten minutes," said the freight conductor.

"I reckon we got room on the Tea Kettle for your hoss," offered the foreman. "An' a place to hang your saddle till you git back."

"I might not be back—not right soon anyway."

"Then I'll be ahead a hoss an' saddle," grinned the foreman. "Come on, I'll make you acquainted with Charlie Johnson. I'm sendin' him in charge."

THAT was how close Tibb Hart came to a caboose ride to Kansas City, and to making the visit he planned to uncles and aunts in Missouri—and maybe a dimpled girl named Marybelle.

But at that moment some sort of a ruckus broke loose in one of the small cutting pens. Tibb heard an angry voice cursing. He saw several Tea Kettle cowboys climb up on the fence as if to watch something. He heard the flap of unridden stirrup leathers and the distressed grunt of a horse.

"Bronc Atlee's fixin' to gentle his hoss, I reckon," said the foreman with a frown. "It piled him three times on the drive in. Bronc's purty wrothy about it."

"Sounds kinder rough!" Tibb's voice sounded a little tight.

As if sensing an unspoken question, perhaps an accusation, the foreman shrugged defensively. "This boy wanted to stay in town a few days to visit his gal, so I let him ride his own private mount on the drive. It's his hoss!"

Tibb Hart understood what he meant—that any "gentling" one of his hands might want to give his own horse was none of a foreman's business.

Tibb swung his lank form up onto the loading platform, strode down the ramp, through the crowding pen onto the counting alley, and climbed the tall plank fence to where a couple of punchers sat on the catwalk between the alley and a small sorting pen.

In the pen a cowboy on foot and a saddled horse were having it around and around. The puncher was of about Tibb's own build, but with a loose-jointed swagger to his movements. The face under his broad-brimmed laloo Stetson was arrogantly handsome, but flushed now with anger. His shirt tail was out, and his huge, sharp-rowelled Mexican spurs jangled loudly with every step. His jaw was thrust out vindictively, and he was cursing in almost a steady stream as he jerked cruelly at the horse's bridle reins.

The pony was a neat-built little bay that wouldn't weigh over 900 pounds, and Tibb could see that he was scared half to death. There was a froth of blood around his mouth where the hard-jerked bit had cut his tongue. He was snorting and circling frantically to keep out of the cowboy's reach. As Tibb topped the fence the puncher kicked him hard in the belly with the dusty toe of a fancy-topped boot.

"Take it easy, Bronc," one of the Tea Kettle hands advised quietly from the fence top. But the puncher down in the pen seemed too crazy-mad to pay any heed.

Suddenly, as he kicked the pony again, the little bay made a desperate lunge that yanked the bridle reins out of Bronc Atlee's grasp and began to circle the small corral in high-headed terror, trying in vain to find a way out. The cowboy made a lunge to catch the reins but missed. In

whirling to dodge him, the pony's rump bumped him and knocked him down. It was not in any sense a kick, for the little bay was making no effort to fight back—only to escape.

Some of the watching cowboys laughed.

Bronc got up cursing. "Gimme a rope! I'll choke him to death!"

Nobody made any move to throw him a rope, but Bronc spied one somebody had carelessly left lying up on the catwalk. and grabbed it.

"Watch yourself, Bronc!" one of the Tea Kettle men called sharply. "Abusin' won't gentle him none!"

Bronc paused only long enough to glance up, his sweat-streaming face red and contorted with anger.

"He's my horse!" he snarled hoarsely. "You mind your own damn business!"

There are unwritten rules among men of the range that they rarely feel justified in breaking. One of them is not to interfere between another man and his own horse.

Bronc Atlee made a loop, swung it, and cursed again as he missed, while the terrified little bay made frantic but useless efforts to jump the tall fence. But the next throw landed neatly over the pony's head. Bronc Atlee set back on his heels, tightening the rope with a jerk. The little bay faltered, but did not fall. Bronc had both the strength and skill to keep the rope tight. In a few seconds the pony's eyes were bulging, his nostrils flared, his lungs bursting for lack of wind. Then suddenly his knees buckled and he dropped to the ground, literally choked down.

WITH a triumphant curse Bronc Atlee ran in quickly and began kicking and stomping the fallen pony's head.

Swift as a cat Tibb Hart dropped off the fence into the corral and reached the raging horse fighter in three strides. He grabbed Bronc Atlee by the back of his shirt collar and yanked him hard away from the horse.

"Now let's stop that!" Tibb's voice was at once quiet and as sharp as a rifle shot.

"Who's gonna make me?" snarled the surprised cowboy.

"I am," said Tibb Hart in a tone that was surprisingly mild to come from between such tightly drawn lips.

"An' who you think you are?"

"My name's Tibb Hart—if it matters!" Tibb gave a jerk and a shove that set Bronc Atlee down halfway across the pen. Then he stooped and worked loose the rope on the little bay horse's neck, unfastened the cinch and stripped the saddle off as the pony staggered to his feet. Tibb held on to the bridle reins as Bronc Atlee came back to him, walking stiff-legged.

"Gimme my horse!" Bronc demanded hoarsely.

"He ain't your horse no more," said Tibb Hart.

"Why the hell ain't he?"

"Because you ain't fit to own a horse. I'm takin' this 'un. You want to take forty dollars for him—or a punch in the nose?"

For several tense seconds the gaze of the two cowboys met and locked. Then Bronc Atlee blinked, his gaze wavered.

"Gimme the forty," he growled, "an' to hell with you!"

Tibb Hart suddenly remembered that outside of his check for accumulated wages at the Bar U, he didn't have forty dollars. He also heard the engineer of the stock train give a toot of warning that he was fixing to pull out pretty soon. Tibb remembered that he was supposed to be Kansas City bound. And here he had this little bay horse on his hands. The pony was rolling his eyes toward Bronc Atlee, but he let Tibb put a soothing hand on his sweaty neck without trying to jerk away.

FOR THE LAST hour, for no reason he could name, Tibb had been aware of an uneasy feeling about taking this trip back to Missouri right now anyway. The engine gave another warning toot, and here came the Tea Kettle foreman to tell him he'd better get aboard.

"Mister," he told the foreman gravely, "I'm a man of my word, an' I'll go if you say so—but I've made up my mind to back out on the trip if you'll let me."

The foreman looked neither much pleased nor displeased. "Suit yourself," he

shrugged. He turned and called out: "Hey, Jess! I reckon you're goin' to town with them cattle after all. Better git aboard!"

"Much obliged," said Tibb. A sort of half-rueful twinkle showed in his eyes. "Looks like I've bought me a little bay horse!"

"Like hell!" snarled Bronc Atlee at his elbow. "I ain't seen no forty dollars yet!"

"You will," Tibb told him calmly. "I got to cash a check first. Your money'll be at the livery stable in town for you not later—" he paused to squint up at the sun—"than two o'clock this afternoon."

"You can't run no whizzer over *me*," said Bronc with a show of reviving bravado. "You want to buy this button-headed bay—all right. But I'll keep the horse till I git my money, savvy!"

He reached for the reins, but found Tibb standing in his way.

"Two o'clock at the livery stable," Tibb said, and led the bay pony out of the corral. The stock train for K. C. was pulling out when he got a rope off his saddle and put it on the little bay. The pony seemed quick to understand that he had found a friend. He was quieter now, and handled easy.

Leading the bay, Tibb rode off a piece down the draw to where the Tea Kettle hands were gathering at the wagon for dinner, Bronc Atlee among them. He tossed Bronc his bridle.

"Two o'clock at the livery stable," he repeated.

Bronc shrugged, looked surly and said nothing.

"Better light an' eat a share with us, Hart," invited the foreman.

Ordinarily Tibb would have accepted as a matter of course, but he was well aware what sort of a mood Bronc Atlee was in, and he was no hand to hunt any more trouble than he had to. He shook his head.

"Much obliged," he said, "but I reckon I'll mosey on back to town."

He heard Bronc Atlee swearing again as he rode away, but didn't turn back to ask him what about.

Like a range rider who turns back for a second look at a track in the trail to make sure it is what his first passing glance told him it was, Tibb Hart found himself turning in at the house on San Hilario's outskirts where he had seen the girl chousing a calf. The name on the mail box was "Morgan."

There was no one in sight outdoors, and it was a middle-aged man in railroader overalls who came to the door. For a moment Tibb was hard put to think of what to say to explain his presence there.

"I notice you got some pasture fenced out back of the house," he said finally. "Was wonderin' if you might rent a man horse-holdin' space for a day or two."

If it sounded pretty lame, the man at the door didn't notice it.

"Sorry, mister," he said, definite but not unfriendly. "That's all the grass I got for my milk cow."

"Much obliged anyhow," said Tibb and went back out to his horses.

HE CASHED his check without trouble, ate a snack at a little restaurant called Tommy's Tail-Gate, and was at the Eagle Livery Stable at two o'clock with money in his pockets. At two-fifteen Bronc Atlee still hadn't showed up.

Tibb asked the stableman to call him if the cowboy came, then went back to the corral behind the stable where he had left the two horses. The little bay had one eye swollen half-shut where a boot heel had stomped, and he still acted scared. Tibb got a curry comb from the rack in the stable, then with as little fuss as possible, dropped a loop over the bay's head. The pony snorted and started to run against the rope, but soon slowed to a stop and stood trembling.

"Whoa, Buttons!" Tibb's tone was firm and quiet. "Ain't nobody goin' to hurt you!"

Though he probably never had been curried before in his life, under Tibb's gentle touch the bay stopped trembling. Tibb wet his bandanna in the horse trough and swabbed blood and dirt from the swollen eye. After a while he saddled the pony and rode him several times around the corral. The horse was a little spooky, but made no effort to buck.

When Tibb went out front again around three o'clock Bronc Atlee still had not

showed up. "Tryin' to make me out a horse thief," thought the cowboy, and started up the street to look for him.

She no longer wore a sunbonnet, but Tibb recognized the girl coming down the street while she was still half a block away. Her hair, now that he could see it, was a soft brown that seemed to catch and enrich every glint of the sun. There was a fat man with her—with a gun on. The cowboy slowed down a little, wondering what excuse he could think of to speak to her. But she saved him the trouble.

"Excuse me," she said as they met. "you're Tibb Hart, aren't you?"

Tibb noted that the plump, grey-mustached man with her wore a star that said, *Sheriff* on it. The girl's velvet-brown eyes met his without wavering. They looked friendly, but there was some sort of anxiety in them. On a sudden impulse, Tibb answered her question.

"Why, I believe you're a stranger to me, ma'am!" He said it with mock primness, but the faint grin that went with it was friendly—and maybe a little more.

Instead of taking offense, the girl smiled, and it made a dimple. "I wasn't very polite, was I? she said. "But you *are* Tibb Hart, aren't you—the man that—that took Bronc Atlee's horse away from him?"

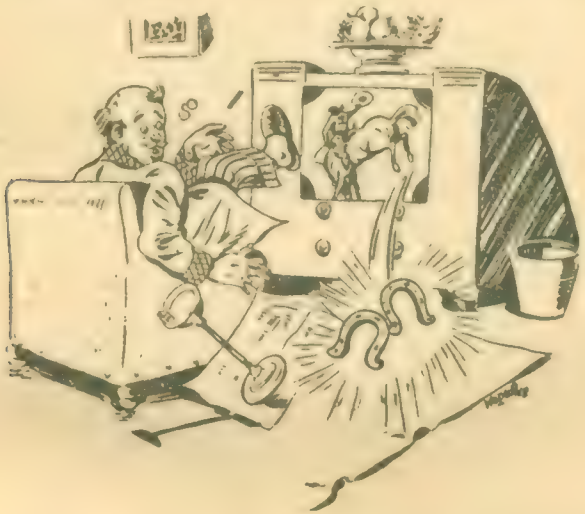
"That's right," said Tibb, a little stiffly. "Why?"

"Because," said the girl with an uneasy look back up the street, "Bronc has been drinking and—and he's got himself all worked up. He's threatened to shoot you on sight! He's looking for you, and—"

"I reckon he ain't lookin' very hard," the cowboy broke in dryly. "I told him I'd be at the Eagle Stable at two o'clock."

"Mr. Hart," said the girl, her voice oddly tremulous, "I got Sheriff Farnham to come with me to—to ask you to leave town—before anything happens!"

"It might be a good idea, Hart," said Sheriff Farnham, batting his pale eyes.



"We don't want no gun trouble around here if we can help it."

For a long moment Tibb Hart stood looking at the girl without replying. In his mind he was putting two and two together. The Tea Kettle foreman had said Bronc Atlee had a girl he was coming to see here in San Hilario. The idea that this gentle, soft-spoken girl might be the sweetheart of a cowpuncher who would mistreat a horse as cruelly as he had seen Bronc Atlee mistreat the little bay, was like an unexpected wallop in the solar plexus. But why else would she be trying to forestall a shooting scrape between Bronc

and an almost total stranger? It all added up.

SOMETHING else had been adding up, too, inside of Tibb Hart ever since he had first seen this girl chousing a calf out of a garden. Maybe it didn't make sense, but it certainly had made fast progress.

"Miss Morgan," said Tibb, speaking slowly because the right words were not easy to find, "if this Bronc Atlee is your feller, it—it's damn well time you started huntin' you another one!"

With that he started to walk on past, but the girl's small hand caught his arm.

"Please!" she cried. "All I'm asking is that you keep away from Bronc so—so there won't be trouble!"

"For him or for me?" At the question the girl looked abruptly away without answering.

"For both of you," advised the Sheriff. "Linda's right. I'd hate to have to throw you in jail, Hart."

"I'd hate to see you try," said Tibb dryly, "when I ain't done anything."

"Hell, man, you ain't even got a gun!"

"I know where I can get one purty quick!" Tibb nodded toward the livery stable where he had left his outfit. "You want me to go after it?"

"Now look here, cowboy," said Sheriff Farnham, "there ain't no sense in you gittin' wringy about this!"

"Why, sure, there ain't," Tibb answered agreeably. "It just happens that I owe Bronc Atlee forty dollars for a little bay horse. So I aim to find him an' pay it. There won't be no trouble—if he don't start it."

"But don't you see? I'm afraid he will!" There was earnest distress in Linda Morgan's voice. "Bronc says he won't sell the horse. He says you forced him to agree to sell at the point of a gun!"

"Well, I don't recollect the gun," Tibb said with a wide grin, "but I reckon maybe I did push the sale a little. Did he by any chance tell you why?"

"No-o, but please, Tibb—I mean Mr. Hart—why can't you just give Sheriff Farnham the money to give to Bronc?"

"Linda," broke in the cowboy, hardly aware that he had used her first name, "you look to me like a girl that might savvy what I mean. Sometimes a man feels like it's sort of a point of honor to pay his debts in person—same as he does not to go skulkin' out of town like a coyote with his tail down when some fourflusher threatens to shoot him. Besides, maybe I've got reasons for not wantin' to leave town right now."

Maybe what he meant was visible in his eyes, but Linda did not raise her own distressed eyes to see. Once more Tibb started on up the street. This time it was Sheriff Farnham who grabbed his arm.

"Hold on, Hart! I know how you feel about this. But I don't want no trouble. Supposin' you go back to the stable an' wait while I hunt up Bronc Atlee an' talk him out of his gun. Then I'll fetch him to you, you can pay him his forty damn dollars, an' that'll settle it. I hear you're Kansas City bound anyhow. You can ketch the evenin' train—"

Tibb shook his head. With a hard, firm grip he removed the sheriff's hand from his arm. "I ain't Kansas City bound no more," he said. "I'm—"

"Look!" exclaimed the girl in a scared, whispery voice. "There comes Bronc now!"

Something over half a block away three cowboys had just come out of the Red Bull Saloon and were coming down the street. The tall one had a gun on. He came a little ahead of the others, walking stiff-legged, his lank body rigid, his arms swinging with a half-drunken swagger.

AS CASUALLY as if he were merely some cowboy just come to town and on his way to a barbershop, Tibb Hart walked up the street to meet him. From the sounds behind him he surmised that Sheriff Farnham had tried to cache the girl in a nearby bootshop, but without any luck. He could hear her quick, light step. along with the sheriff's heavier tread, on the boardwalk behind him. Tibb had Bronc Atlee sized up in his mind as a fourflusher—all gurgle and no gut—and he didn't really expect any trouble. But just the same he wished Linda

Morgan were somewhere else. He also hoped the sheriff would keep his nose out.

He quickened his step a little, watching Bronc Atlee's right hand closely, yet without seeming to.

Two dozen steps away Bronc stopped and waited, flanked by the two Tea Kettle hands at a discreet distance on either side of him. There was a scowl on Bronc's face. His right hand dropped to the holt of his six-shooter.

"I been lookin' for you, Hart!" he called out loudly. "You can't run no whizzer over me!"

Tibb Hart calmly came on toward him. He knew there was a chance that he was being a damn fool, a chance that Bronc Atlee had enough alcohol in him to use his gun—even against an unarmed man, and in the presence of witnesses. But he doubted it. Without haste he fished out his wallet.

"I've brought you the money for that horse, Atlee," he said.

"To hell with your money!" snarled Bronc. "I ain't sellin' you no horse."

"You've done sold him," said Tibb.

At about ten feet Bronc suddenly swore and drew his sixgun. Just as suddenly Linda Morgan stepped between them, straight in front of it.

"Shame on you, Bronc!" she cried. "Give me that gun!"

For answer to that, Bronc Atlee took a sudden, long step forward, grabbed the girl's wrist with his free hand and yanked her roughly to his side, so hard that she almost fell.

"Damn it, Linda!" he said hoarsely. "What the hell you mixin' into this for?"

On the half-drunk cowboy's face Tibb Hart could see the same uncontrolled flare of brutal temper he had seen there when he was abusing the little bay out at the stock pens. Up to now Tibb had held himself under a firm, tight rein, but that tore it.

SWIFT as a bobcat springing on a rabbit, he got to Bronc Atlee in two strides, yanked the sixgun from his grasp, threw it halfway across the street with one hand and slapped the surprised cowboy across the face with the open palm of the other.

By all the rough, tough rules that range men live by, it should have been a fight then, man to man, and no holds barred. Maybe for one brief instant it was. Without letting go his left-handed hold on the girl's wrist, Bronc Atlee swung once with his right fist at Tibb Hart's face, missed and found himself with a bloody nose.

Bronc finally let go his grip on the girl's wrist. Tibb Hart stood, limber and ready.

"Atlee," he said, his voice as soft and tough as wet rawhide, "you wasn't fit to own that little bay horse—an' you ain't fit to court this girl. If you ever come near her again I aim to knock your head off an' show it to you. Now git!"

As Bronc started to back away, Tibb tossed four ten dollar bills at his feet. Once out of reach, Bronc's bravado revived.

"I'll see you again, Hart!" he threatened. "When nobody can butt in!"

"Now, you boys!" warned Sheriff Farnham. "You know I won't stand for no gun trouble around here!"

Tibb's grin widened. "I sure wouldn't worry about that if I was you, Sheriff!"

But there was another matter on Tibb Hart's mind that he couldn't feel like grinning about—and it wasn't train passage to Missouri. What he would have done if Linda Morgan had gone to Bronc Atlee again he didn't know. But she didn't. When he overtook her half a block down the street he thought he saw signs of crying.

He had an arm that wanted mighty bad to comfort her. Instead he merely walked beside her, glad she made no objection.

"I reckon you think I had a lot of gall," he said finally, "givin' a man orders to keep away from his own girl, an' me practically a stranger."

But it was all right. From somewhere in the distance came the long, wailing whistle of a freight engine—just another train load of cattle, Kansas City bound. Out in the corral back of the stable a horse nickered—like as not the little bay. And here at the hoof-scuffed entrance of a dingy cowtown livery stable, Linda Morgan looked up at him and smiled.

She waited for her chance when Jake was topside

Waiting for the Dakota Belle

By Ben T. Young

LIKE most dwellers along the Missouri River when steamboating was in its prime, Susie Brant could name a packet by the sound of its whistle. That's why, when the morning breeze brought a certain two-toned hoot from down around the next bend, Susie's heart jumped like a spooked jackrabbit. The *Dakota Belle* was coming in to Fisher's to fuel up, and the mud-clerk who would hustle ashore to attend to the business was Mr. Thaddeus Wofford. Susie, plucking a sage hen outside the kitchen, dropped the messy job and began to wash her hands.

Old Ned Fisher was already down among his stacks of cottonwood just above the high-water line; and Kate, his daughter, had dived into her red calico and joined him. Kate, too, had an eye for Mr. Wofford—and most other men. Jake, the son, had just finished burying a yearling's hide with another man's brand on it. Dropping his spade, he shambled out of the corral toward Susie.

"Listen, you little bobcat," he growled, fingering a lump on his black-stubbled jaw. "That clout you fetched me come near drawin' blood."

With annoyed quickness Susie straightened and blew a lock of dark hair from one hostile eye. "You've got to stop tryin' to kiss me!"

"I won't stop tryin' to kiss you! You're beholden to us fer givin' you a home, and we—"

"Your ma did that and I'm grateful! But since she died I've done all the housework. That's paid for my keep. I don't have to stand for any of your pawing around me!"

Rocking back on his runover heels, grimy thumbs hooked in the waistband of his dirty jeans, Jake grinned. "You will, though, right soon. Come a week from today I'm drivin' to Pierre on business, and you're comin' along fer a weddin'. You don't dast refuse because you got no money, no clothes, no other home. The ol' man don't dast kick lest I pull out and leave him to run this outfit alone!"

Jake slouched off. Feeling as though a bronc had kicked her, Susie sat down on the bench. She was caught like a filly in a horse trap. It had been bad enough to have to stay here, ignored by Ned, scorned by lazy Kate and badgered by Jake, but now it was worse with Jake crowding her so close. I'll have to get away this week, she decided. I'd drown myself rather than marry that lout.

The *Dakota Belle* was close inshore now. Susie knew because the puffing and splashing had suddenly ceased. There was only the brief tinkle of a bell signalling the engineer. Rising, she went around the corner of the log shack; and despite her troubles she felt a lift at the sight.

Sun glinted on the big steamer's bell and whistle, and on the gilt balls ornamenting the monkey-brace between the smoking stacks; and save for the green shutters on the deck houses the woodwork was gleaming white. Passengers lined the larboard rail of the cabin deck, the blue-uniformed captain stood in lofty solitude on the texas, and leaning over the bow the leadsman with his notched, two-fathom pole was sounding the shoal water. "Half twain!" he called. "Quarter twain!" Then bells

SUSIE'S shenanigans on shore couldn't bring the river packet any faster, but they might keep her in circulation till the steamer arrived

jangled and the paddle-wheel began to thrash backwards.

Very little of this was Susie seeing in detail. Her eyes were on a lad standing poised at the end of the gangplank still high in the air. Wind whipped his pants about his bony shanks, and he held his soft, blue cap with one hand and gripped an eight-foot rod with the other. That was Mr. Thaddeus Wofford.

AS THE PLANK began to lower over the muddy shore he leaped and came down running, for taking on fuel was a hurry-up chore, and river captains were an impatient lot. In two shakes he'd decided the nearest stack was dry, piled solid, and a full four feet wide. Too, it was as high as the rod he carried; and, hurrying down its length, he found it ten times as long. Like ants out of a burning log the roustabouts—quite a jag of them—had been piling ashore, and at a signal from Wofford they began taking apart the twenty-cord stack and hustling it aboard.

After paying Ned his fifty dollars, Wofford was through and looked around. He didn't have to look far, for Susie had edged closer and closer, wishing desperately that she had a dress that wasn't limp and colorless as a tow sack. Fortunately for Susie, Kate had this time passed up Wofford for the admiring stare of a Fort Lincoln bound soldier among the passengers, so Susie had a clear field.

"Mr. Wofford," she began without preamble, "I'd like mighty well to get away from here right soon. I wonder if you know of some good folks who want kitchen help, and could I get a free ride there? That is, not free exactly, but on jawbone till I earned the money to pay the steamboat company."

At once Wofford's nice, dark eyes were full of trouble. For a moment he stared and gulped like a trout out of water. Then he looked at his muddy feet.

He doesn't want to get tangled with the likes of the Fishers, Susie told herself. He thinks I've got bold like Kate.

"I'm not one of this tribe," she protested. "My pa and ma were first-rate folks from Illinois, and if they hadn't been killed when a twister struck our homestead yonder I wouldn't be in a place like this."

"I know," Wofford said. "After we'd stopped here on my first trip I asked the Captain about you. He said it was a blasted shame you had to—"

Susie wasn't hearing any more. The news that Mr. Thaddeus Wofford had troubled to find out about her made her a little tipsy, like the time Jake had laced her coffee with a snort of forty-rod.

"Then you will help me!" She grasped Wofford's arm. "They have no claim on me, but it will save a ruckus could I get aboard without them knowing."

"Hi, Wofford," the mate called, gesturing impatiently.

Confused as a range cow on an Omaha street corner, Wofford started off, and Susie's soaring hopes dropped like a shot hawk. Then Wofford turned and loped back. "Barring delays we'll be back a week from today," he panted. "I'll think of some way to help you."

Another yell from the mate and Wofford high-tailed, and long after he had gone Susie stood staring through eyes misty with disappointment. A week from this morning might be in time, but a week from this afternoon would be too late.

DINNER that noon was even less pleasant than usual. Ned was especially grumpy because the down-bound *General Sheridan* had passed up his wood with a derisive hoot from midstream. He remarked that like as not the officers of the *General Sheridan* had been displeased with the last purchase due to some shenanigans of Jake. "I've told you time and again to put no rotten sticks in them shacks, and to pile 'em honest," he growled.

"Aw," Jake sulked, his cheeks bulging with soda biscuit. "Leave them mud-clerks look out fer themselves. If they'd quit snortin' around Kate they'd see what they was buyin'."

"Huh!" Like a cantankerous black-maned filly Kate tossed her head and glared at Susie. "Speakin' of men," she said through her teeth. "You keep away from Thad Wofford."

Jumpy as a cat on ice Susie spilled coffee,

then put down her cup. With food-laden knife poised in mid-air, Jake added his scowl to Kate's.

"I thought," Susie said to Kate, "that you aimed to hook yourself one of those eight-hundred-dollars-a-month pilots. Mr. Wofford's only a cut above a pantry boy, just a second-clerk who checks freight off and on when the shore's too muddy for the first clerk. If Mr. Wofford ever gets to be so much as a mate I'll be surprised."

"You jughead," Kate scoffed, wiping her lips with the back of her hand. "Wofford won't ever be a mate because he won't have to ride the river that long. His folks in St. Louis got money. They're part owners of the *Dakota Belle* and got a Montana ranch as well. They gave him a choice of bein' a cowman or a steamboater. He's now tried both and likes the ranch best. He's goin' there soon to live and someday run the place. The clerk on the *Chippewa* told me."

As Susie did the afternoon's work, shock and surprise still had her mind spinning like a chip in a whirlpool. I would fall in love with a man as out of reach as the moon, she fretted. He probably thinks I knew about his family and was trying to work him. True enough I had caught his eye, but maybe only for the reason that men with money ofttimes take after poor girls. Still, he's my best chance to get away from here. If he thinks me a Jezebel, all right. I can outsmart him for long enough to get safe somewhere.

THROUGH the next days and nights she could only hope and worry, and to make the tension almost unbearable a muggy hot spell set in. Tempers flared, and Kate sulked idle in the barrel-stave hammock under the box-elder tree while Ned damned Jake for letting the buildings and equipment fall apart. Sundown brought no relief, for the loft where Susie and Kate shared a straw-tick bed was stifling under the low sod roof, and Kate used deck-hand language on the mosquitoes.

The day before the *Dakota Belle* was due back, the air was full of something about to happen. Birds were silent, and not a whisper stirred the leaves on the trees. The river was glassy, and after noon, as a grey film gradually overspread the sky, the water took on a sullen, oily look.

Susie found time to wash and iron the best of her two sad dresses, long since discarded by Kate, and cautiously, lest she be questioned, she got out her coarse stockings and broken shoes, stowed away till the winter. Then, when she was sure Jake was well off the premises, she washed her hair and took an all-over bath in the river where a willow thicket offered some privacy. She was ready.

By supper time the sky downriver was black as a road agent's heart. Jagged streaks of lightning daggered from it, and the distant rumble of thunder was almost continuous, as though empty barrels were rolling down a rocky hillside.

After overturning his home-made flatboat well up on the shore, and stowing the oars beneath it, Ned inspected the anchorage of his live-box and set-line. With the meal ready to serve, Susie stood in the doorway watching him, and he'd no more than finished when the storm struck.

As though bursting out of an exploding steamboat boiler, wind and rain and blinding lightning arrived together. For a solid hour the din was awful, and all the occupants of the shack could do was to sit mute, each with his own thoughts. Susie's were on the *Dakota Belle*. Not that she feared that the stern-wheeler's captain hadn't the sense to hunt a lee shore and make fast, fore and aft, to stout trees. She feared that he'd find it prudent to stay so all night, and bring Mr. Wofford hours too late.

She tried to console herself with the thought that the wagon-track to town would be hub-deep with gumbo so that Jake would be forced to postpone his trip. Jake, however, when he wanted to do something, was hard to stop; and when the storm had finally passed and Ned remarked about the probable condition of the road, Jake leered at Susie and said his business couldn't wait and he'd get the wagon through. Susie felt as though her veins were suddenly running snow water.

While Kate climbed the ladder to curse the rain that had blown into the loft, and Ned and Jake took the lantern and went

down to the shore, Susie skipped out to the leanto beside the barn. Groping desperately in the dark she found the rusty wrench she was hunting, and after more fumbling got it adjusted to the skein nut which held the right front wheel on the running gear of the wagon. Because Jake seldom bothered with axle grease the nut was rusted in place, and only by frenzied tugging could she loosen it. Finally it gave, and dropping the wrench she began hurrying the nut off with her fingers.

Then, above the sound of water dripping from eaves and trees, she heard someone slopping toward her through the mud. Fear froze her as it does a wild thing. She had no excuse for being there. Ned would dismiss her with a grunt, but Jake—

It was Jake, singing *Buffalo Gals*. Jake's singing wasn't much for music but was hell for loud, so he didn't hear her scramble under the wagon.

With heart thumping like a Sioux war drum she crouched there. Still singing, Jake tripped over the wagon tongue, mentioned some Biblical names, then fumbled beneath the wagon seat. Susie heard a cork squeak, then a gurgle, and the biting odor of bust-head whiskey told her what he was up to.

Came a sigh of gratification, another gurgle, then Jake stumbled into the barn and began talking to the team. Susie took a chance and finished removing the nut. Gripping it tightly and moving like a scared deer, she reached the house, dropped the nut into the crevice between the split log stoop and door-sill and stepped inside.

AGAIN she didn't sleep but lay wide-eyed and fidgeting, longing for the day to come and end the awful tension.

Breakfast, as usual, was eaten in glum silence. Then Jake drained the last of the coffee from his saucer, looked belligerently at his father and announced, "I'm takin' Sue to town."

"Whatever for?" Kate whined. "Who's goin' to get the dinner and—"

"Shut up!" Jake snapped with such violence that Kate did.

Ned said nothing, just looked for a long moment at Susie, grunted and rose from the table.

"Leave the dishes," Jake told her as he, too, rose. "We're leavin' soon's I hitch up."

Trembling so that she could hardly grip the rungs of the ladder she went up to change her dress. From the sashless openings at each end of the loft she couldn't see out back; but she heard the team, its harness jingling, leave the barn and halt before the wagon. She heard the rattle of trace chains and pole straps being hooked to doubletree and neck yoke. "Now," she murmured, rigid as a frozen snipe.

"Giddap!" Jake yelled, and without mishap the outfit rolled across the yard. "Sue!" he bawled.

Staring straight ahead and moving with the dazed woodenness of a man walking to the gallows, she took her sunbonnet and went out. Just now she could think of no other course of action. She'd have to go, and make a break later. Could be she'd find the *Dakota Belle* at the town landing. Failing that, she'd manage to give Jake the slip and take to the hills. Why didn't that wheel come off? she wondered, climbing to the wagon seat. Did he notice the nut was missing and have another to replace it?

Kate was nowhere in sight, but Ned was sitting on the stoop. The mud was steaming under the early sun, and nose flies were pestering the broncs so that Jake stood at their heads. Just as he gathered the line and climbed aboard, a boat whistle gave a preliminary, far-off toot, and Susie felt an upsurge of hope; but when the long blast came she knew it was not the *Dakota Belle*.

"Giddap," Jake said. The broncs lunged into their collars, and the wheel came off, letting the front end of the wagon sag drunkenly. "Whoa!" Jake yelled, but the broncs were not having any. They bolted. Squawking chickens fled from their path, and with a leap Susie quit the outfit. Rolling to her knees in the muck she blew that lock of hair out of her eyes and saw Jake, tugging and yanking and finally having his way. The things he was saying bested everything Susie had ever heard.

Ned hadn't bothered to get up off the stoop. He merely removed the pipe from

his mouth, spat, and looked at Jake. "Serves you right," he declared. "I've told you time and again to keep things in order."

Seemingly mad enough to bite himself Jake was scurrying about peering at the ground. "That damn nut should be here somewhere!" he stormed.

"Mebbe not," Ned said. "It may have fell off a week ago and a mile from here. The wheel stayed because that skein ain't had no grease. Your own fault. Better put the team up afore they tear the harness apart. By the time you get organized 'twill be too late to start."

Unnoticed, Susie went back inside, cleaned the drying mud from her clothes and went to work. The first underhanded thing she'd ever done had turned out well, and under the circumstances she felt no qualms. Now, if that boat gets here today, she told herself hopefully.

MIDDAY passed and no Thaddeus Wofford. Near sunset a cowpoke jogging south on a paint horse drew rein. "Hear 'bout the *Dakota Belle?*" he called to Ned.

Susie's heart gave a great lurch, and Ned shook his head.

"She's afoul a new sandbar the storm throwed up about two miles yonder," the cowpoke said. "They're a-tryin' to spar off without hoggin' her, but I reckon it'll take all night."

Well, anyway, Susie consoled herself, pouring the supper coffee. There's an even chance Mr. Wofford gets here before Jake fixes that wheel.

Jake, however, had quit fretting about the wagon. "I'll get a nut in town," he told Ned. "Me'n' Sue's goin' in a-horseback come mornin'."

Susie's wits went to work again. Why not take Ned's boat and go to Mr. Wofford? If he had nothing to offer she'd go ashore, ask someone to return the boat, and at least be free of Jake. If Wofford did take her aboard, the rowboat could be taken too, and put off at Fisher's.

Unfortunately, though, Ned hadn't run his set-line yet that day; and, using the boat, went about it right after supper. However, he'd finish about dark, a better time for Susie to slip away.

Jake was in the barn; Kate was in her hammock; and when Susie had done with the dishes she went to the loft and made a bundle of her few belongings. Tossing it out the window she descended the ladder and strolled out, trying to appear unconcerned lest someone be watching. When satisfied they were not, she retrieved the bundle and hid among the wood stacks.

Out on the water, placid and green in the fading light, Ned was fighting gnats and working along his line, removing an occasional sucker and rebaiting the hooks. Slowly the water took on a purple hue and Ned was closer to the shore. Another quarter hour would end the suspense.

"Sue!" Jake called from the house.

Instinctively she tried to make herself smaller, like a rabbit too frightened to run. She knew he'd been drinking again, adding to his ill humor and desire for her. She heard him clumping about the loft. The next summons, more urgent, was roared from an upper window. From the end of a stack she peered riverward. Ned, now only a silhouette against the eery light on the water, was still a hundred feet from shore, his progress seemingly no better than that of a snail climbing a slick log.

"Sue, where are you?" Jake was hot-footing down the aisle between two stacks. Next, he'd turn into the one where she crouched. Just in time she scrambled to safety, and when he'd lurched past she backtracked. While he was headed the other way she abandoned her bundle, went like a cat up the side of a stack and lay stove-lid flat on its top.

Now I'm safe, she thought. But she wasn't, for Kate was evidently watching from the house and had seen her against the sheen on the water.

"Jake!" Kate called. "Look atop them stacks!"

As Jake, befuddled, stopping his tromping and cursing, there came the rattle of oarlocks and the scraping of a skiff bottom on mud. Peering in the direction whence it came Susie saw the indistinct shape of a small, white boat.

"Who you?" Jake challenged at once.

For a moment the newcomer didn't answer. Deliberately he unshipped his oars, stepped ashore and pulled the skiff a short way after him. "I'm Wofford of the *Dakota Belle,*" he said then. "I've come to see Miss Susie."

SHEER astonishment rendered Miss Susie speechless. She stood up, opened her mouth, but no sound came.

"Ho!" Jake bellowed. "So that's why she's hid out, waitin' fer you. Well, you can't come tom-cattin' around here, so shove off."

"I don't take orders from you," Wofford said with a confidence which surprised Susie.

It was now too dark to see much, but she heard Jake growl. Then came a grunt and a thud. Whiffing away that unruly lock of hair, she ran and jumped. Like a couple of clawing, gouging panthers the two were rolling in the mud, and when one she made out to be Jake came topside she latched onto his greasy hair and yanked. The yelp he loosed would have shamed a coyote, and Wofford took advantage of the respite to get from under and to his feet.

With the noiseless speed of a cat Kate had arrived and laid hold of Susie, but Susie tore free and stood beside Wofford. "Come on!" she urged, clutching his arm and backing toward his skiff. As they retreated the two Fishers advanced warily. Silent as usual, Ned was somewhere in the darkness offshore.

Still moving backward, Susie and Wofford grasped the skiff and took it with them as they waded. Without a word each seemed to sense the part he must play. When the boat was well afloat Wofford took an oar, and as Susie stepped aboard he made a threatening gesture which the Fishers couldn't see but felt the breeze of. They halted, and quickly Wofford gave the skiff a mighty shove and scrambled over the stern.

With a howl of rage Jake gave chase, wading and floundering, bent on swamping them. With oars shipped, Wofford took a stroke which shot them away. Then, with a bump, they stopped. "Where you takin' Sue, Wofford?" Ned demanded, pulling their craft alongside his.

"To a wedding on the *Dakota Belle,* if she'll have me," Wofford panted. "Otherwise, I know a nice old couple down at Yankton who want a girl—"

Abruptly Ned rose with an oar lifted. "Jake!" he roared. "I'm sick'n' tired o' your monkey business. Get out of here or I'll fix you fer slow travelin'."

Some regained authority in the old man's voice seemed to impress Jake. He retired.

"Now," Ned said, sitting down again. "You wanna marry this boy, Sue?"

"Why, of course!" she cried. "But I never dreamed—"

"On the chance you might be willing," Wofford broke in, leaning toward her, "I had a woman up in Bismarck find some clothes for you. They're aboard. Getting on a sandbar up above delayed us, but it left me with nothing to do for a while; and suspecting from the way you talked last week that you were in a hurry to leave here, I came to see if you'd go back with me. Among the passengers is a missionary who's been up working on the Mandan Indians. He can marry us."

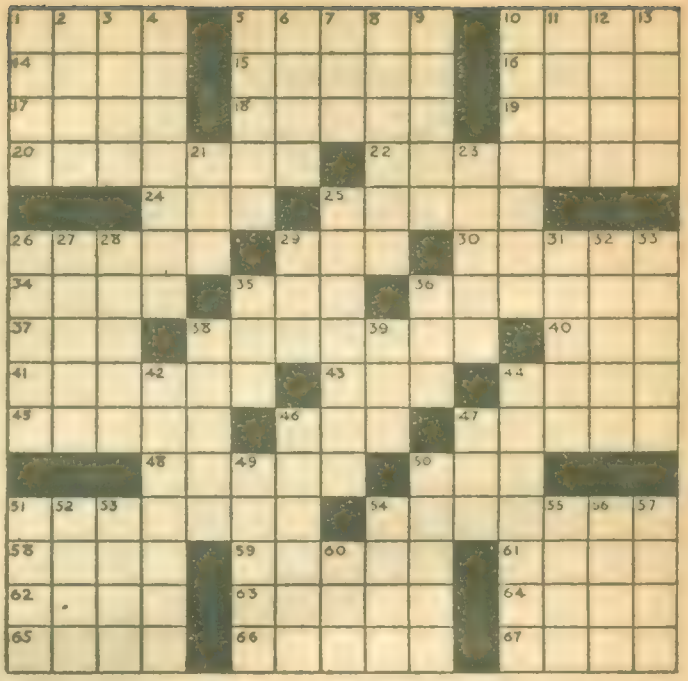
With a grunt Ned shoved the boats apart. "You go 'long with him, Sue," he said. "You're a good kid, and I'm glad to see you do so well."

In addition to other assorted emotions Susie felt sudden remorse. "I'm sorry I wrecked your wagon," she called after the receding voice. "You'll find that nut—"

"I done found it this mornin'," Ned chuckled. "So long."

THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE

The solution to this puzzle will appear in the next issue



ACROSS

1. Waste
5. Smallest amount
10. Cross
14. Pagan image
15. Player
16. To impel
17. Small, burrowing animal
18. At that place
19. Purchase
20. Mustang
22. Poisonous snake
24. Female antelope
25. Treadle
26. Scattered
29. Friend
30. To depart
34. Fruit
35. Existed
36. Cattle enclosure
37. Hotel
38. Caricature
40. Owing
41. Fabled, delicious drink
43. Vase
44. Ballad
45. Inflammable fluid
46. Anger
47. Company
48. Cattle land
50. Canvas bed
51. To lessen
54. Cargo
58. To adore
59. Fashion
61. To turn around
62. So be it
63. To eradicate
64. Tumbled
65. Simple
66. To drive back
67. To scream

DOWN

1. Arm
2. Fragrance
3. Performance by one
4. Slim
5. Machine for turning articles
6. To reverberate
7. Dined
8. Reddish-brown horse
9. To step
10. Cattle thief
11. Verbal
12. To look askance
13. Horned ruminant
21. Female bovine
23. Claw
25. Land for grazing
26. Backbone
27. Doctrine
28. Cattle farm
29. Equal
31. Zeal
32. To brag
33. Dirge
35. Armed conflict
36. To study
38. Jeweler's weight
39. Native mineral
42. Earthy
44. To gratify
46. To disregard
47. American author
49. At no time
50. Fishing basket
51. Bang
52. One's residence
53. Finished
54. To melt by heat
55. Merriment
56. Husk
57. To relate
60. Breach

Solution to First April Puzzle

MEDICINE RANCH

BY AUSTIN CORCORAN AND MYRTLE JULIETTE COREY

BURR DIXON had no idea how far he was from a road, but he believed the trail he had picked up would lead to a ranch. When it divided on a ridge top, he took the left fork since it showed more travel. As he wove his way downward between bunches of giant boulders, he caught glimpses of the silvery loops of a stream on the valley floor. Once an outward swing of the trail revealed a pool that held the iridescence of an opal under the westering sun, a pinkish glow showing through its blue.

Except for white-faced cattle near the stream, he saw no evidence of life in the valley. He heard no sounds save the squawking of a magpie or the clink of his horse's hoofs against bits of stone, until the terrified cry of a girl's voice came from an invisible spot below. Then a saddled horse galloped into view, stirrups slapping as he tore off down the valley.

A jab of the spur sent his horse plunging down the final twists of the trail, where he halted for a sweeping glance about him. On his right the valley floor undulated from the stream back to a stretch of slick wall. On the left a gargantuan jumble of rocky formations shaped into a crescent, the tip of this blending into a low butte that extended several hundred yards into the valley. Between Dixon and the butte lay the opalescent pool, a silver thread of water dropping into it from a natural terrace above. Nowhere could he see the rider of the runaway horse, the girl whose voice had held such fright.

Burr headed quickly around a thicket of scrubby growth that grew for some distance out from the rocks. Beyond this he discovered that several plank doors had been set into the face of the irregular formation. At once he guessed that these gave entry to steam caves, and he had accidentally come upon Medicine Hot Springs. He saw that the nearest of the doors stood half-open. And on the ground between door and jamb were small, scuffed boots, levis tucked neatly into their tops.

"There she is!" he exclaimed aloud, springing from his saddle.

Catching the reins hastily around a sap-

If it wasn't love, it sure was something plenty powerful

WAS IT black witchcraft or human greed, guarding the springs, bringing love to one man, death to another?

ling, he leaped to the doorway. A girl lay with one cheek against the cave floor, the other concealed by waves of shoulder-length, brown hair. She wasn't very tall, and her waist, circled by a silver concho belt, was slender and round.

Dixon thrust the door wide open and dropped to his knees beside her. He drew the hair gently back from her face. At his touch, a shallow breath stirred the silk scarf knotted beneath the turned over collar of her blouse. But the ruffle of thick, dark lashes lay motionless against a colorless cheek. The air inside the grotto was heavy with an enervating heat. Sliding an arm carefully beneath her, he lifted the unconscious girl and carried her into the open. There he laid her gently on a patch of soft, sandy soil.

Before Dixon could make a further move, her eyes opened, surprising him with their deep violet shading and the quick coming of comprehension into their depths.

"Some of . . . the roof fell," she said with only a slight halting in her speech. "It hit me . . . here." Lifting a hand she touched a spot gingerly above her right ear.

"Um-m-m, quite a bump, too," Burr told her, leaning over for a close look. "I was coming down the trail," he explained. "I heard you scream, saw your horse racing away and thought he'd bucked you off."

"Cricket isn't very well broken," she said. "I suppose he bolted when I screeched and dropped his reins. I'd ridden out here to look around and plan some work to be done at the springs before people start coming this summer. I noticed that door was swinging and came around the pool to make sure no stock had gotten inside."

She had raised herself on an elbow and with Dixon's help sat up. Her head was held a bit stiffly but she was making a brave show of being all right.

"It was terribly odd," she went on, puckering her brows, "but the second I stepped into that doorway, I had a scared feeling. Like a kid that expects something terrible to jump from the dark inside. I guess I screamed, then a rock or something fell from the roof—that was that." She smiled with a crinkling of the eye corners that fascinated Burr.

She was smoothing the tumbled hair in which he discovered rich shades like oak brush leaves in fall. The set of her firm, little jaw betrayed her battle against the dizziness that clouded her eyes when she moved her head.

"I'm going to put you on my horse and pack you home," he declared.

"Thanks," she said. "A ride would be nice. It isn't far. I'm Holly Ferris and I live at Medicine Ranch, the other side of that bluff there." She pointed down valley.

"Medicine Ranch!" Burr exclaimed with unmistakable interest,

"You've heard of it?" Holly asked.

"It's quite famous around here, isn't it?" he replied. "For the hot springs, I mean," he added with a haste that caused her to give him a curious look.

"Mostly for the springs, I suppose," she said, "though it's the biggest cow outfit in this part of the State. We have lots more stock than Senator Hendrix's place, up the valley." She changed the subject abruptly. "Now, if I had my hat I'd be ready to go, and we'll be right on time for supper. Aunt Della loves company, too."

"Sit still," Burr commanded. "I'll collect your headgear."

He went leaping back to the cave. The interior wasn't too dusky to discern a bench near the rear wall, and Holly's wide-brimmed hat on the floor which seemed free from rubble of any sort. Whatever fell, he thought, must have been pushed behind the door as he thrust it farther open. Grabbing the hat, he pulled the plank barrier into place and thrust its stout hook into the staple, then hurried to rejoin Holly.

He swung her into the saddle with a single, easy movement.

"I'm glad for the chance to walk the kinks out of my legs," he told her. "Been sitting that saddle for hours. I wanted to look this country over, so I struck away from the main road not far from Three Wells and just kept ramblin'. By the way," he gave her an apologetic grin, "my name is Burr Dixon, and my native habitat the Milk River country in Montana."

Holly didn't talk much, but she gave him a nice smile in return for his frequent con-

cerned glances. If she had to get plunked on the head with a rock, he considered it a marvelous streak of luck that he happened to be near.

WHEN they rounded the bluff end, the lower valley before them, he saw that Medicine Ranch was a real old-time setup. The house had a look of substantiality and comfort without gingerbread trimmings. There were good corrals and outbuildings and a few fine cottonwoods that supplied shade without cutting off all sunshine from the premises.

As they approached, a grey-haired woman came hurrying from the porch to meet them. She was followed by a man whose slightly stooped shoulders and stiffened gait did not deprive him of a look of physical sturdiness.

"Cricket threw you!" the woman exclaimed, with eyes only for the girl in the saddle of the strange horse.

"No, indeed!" Holly replied emphatically, adding a hasty explanation of her mishap. A face at one of the open windows evidenced that somebody inside the house was listening with interest. In conclusion Holly said, laying a hand slightly on Dixon's shoulder, "This is Don Quixote Burr Dixon, from Montana, Aunt Della and Grandfather Ferris. He heard my lusty yip and came dashing down the ridge to my rescue."

Eyes that were still keen below their frosty, dark brows had given Dixon a swift appraisal. "Glad to know you," Ferris told him, extending his hand with a heartiness that welcomed the stranger as a friend rather than a chance guest. Turning, he called to a stubby-figured man at one of the corrals, "Hi, Pat! Come get this horse. And you," he added to Burr, "come on in and make yourself to home."

When they entered the house a buxom, brown-eyed, dark-skinned woman retreated from the window, her gaze fixed on Holly.

"I'm all right, Nez Bah," she said.

The woman shook her head. Going close to Holly she spoke in so low a tone that Dixon barely caught her words. "It is not good for you to change what the mountain placed as it willed it to be. What is, you should leave. You go to that place to look what you will move, and see—" lifting a small, brown hand she pointed to Holly's head—"a piece drop from the mountain and it strike you. Don't do this thing you plan, Holly, it is not good. Trouble will come, bad trouble." Nez Bah's hand dropped to her breast. "I feel it here—heavy!"

Holly patted her arm. "Hold it, Nez Bah," she said reprovingly. "You know you don't believe in that stuff, gods and angry mountains. Forget it, now, and dish up supper."

THE WOMAN'S gaze shifted to Dixon. Her velvet-brown eyes had a mesmeric quality that held his glance. He knew he was being judged for the second time within a few minutes of his arrival. But Nez Bah's impassive features betrayed no reaction from her probing scrutiny. She went noiselessly through a doorway at the rear of the living room. Yet something of her personality lingered. He seemed still to be hearing her low, uninflected voice.

"Of course you'll stay over night," Aunt Della told him hospitably. "Ben, you show him where to wash up while I take a look at this bruise Holly's got." She moved with a capable briskness, her plump figure and pink cheeks making her appear younger than the white hair and certain lines etched near eyes and mouth suggested.

The cowboys came in to eat supper with the family. They were a cheerful group, around the table set at one end of the big kitchen. The ranch owner's craggy features had a pleasant cast; twinkles hovered in Pat Crowley's keen eyes, and the kid cowpuncher, Ranny Joyce, had the ready grin that goes with a happy-go-lucky nature. Rufe Prettyman alone did not fit the pattern. His laughter was an abrupt guffaw without mirth, his slate-colored eyes were mostly devoid of expression, though Dixon sensed that their owner was plenty observant.

Dixon, himself, had eyes only for Holly. She looked cuter than ever with a wide, orange ribbon bound around her small head to conceal the dressing Aunt Della

and insisted upon applying to the bruise.

She fussed over Holly like a hen with one chick. Ferris was no fusser, but it was evident that she was the focus of her grandfather's chief interest too. She bantered easily with the cowboys or threw a sensible remark into the general conversation with no hint that she thought of herself as an especially important person.

"So you've been stopping in Three Wells," Ferris remarked to Dixon.

"Only last night," he replied. "I'm just prospecting around. Heard this was interesting country and thought I'd ramble over some of it."

"You must've picked up some of Cal Hendrix's propaganda," Pat said.

"Don't know him," Burr replied.

"You don't know our popular, cowman-Senator?" Pat commented with tinge of irony. "Never read his pet publicity item 'bout his home range being one of the most interesting and rarely beautiful spots in our fair land, the Valley of Singing Water and the Juniper Mountain country, with his Bar H Ranch the bright gem of the valley? My, my, do you need educatin'!"

"Some ranch, too!" Ranny exclaimed, gulping the last bite of his second piece of pie. "Red and white umbrellas stuck in the yard with fancy loungin' chairs under 'em, and little tables. More tables an' chairs on the porch. A tennis court. All those doodads like a summer resort outdoors, and inside everything's fancied up with ranch stuff. One end of the living room is made into a pole corral with a gate. There's where they eat." He paused to empty his coffee cup with a final swallow.

"Does he have any cattle?" Burr Dixon asked.

"Sure, sure," Ferris said, chuckling. "Some very good ones, too, fancy shorthorns." Shoving back his chair and getting to his feet, he added, "How about coming out on the porch for a smoke, while the women folks clean up? These May evenings are sure fine."

The sun had dropped from sight but the west still glowed like the heart of a fire, sending flame fingers into the upper sky where they streaked the purple and blue and mauve of the evening clouds. When they had talked for a few minutes, Ferris spoke with unexpected seriousness.

"You said you're just prospecting around, Dixon. If you're looking for a job, I can offer you one." Taken by surprise, Burr hesitated. The ranch owner went on. "I was short-handed anyhow, then a coupla days ago a fellow I relied on had to quit because his brother was sick and he had to go look after that outfit. I don't ride much any more, and Pat can't take on everything. Ranny's a kid and Rufe Prettyman a thick-headed plodder. I size you up as a feller that savvies the cow business pretty thoroughly, and I believe you'll fit in here fine."

Dixon's thoughts milled in confusion. He liked the setup at Medicine Ranch, but most of all liked the idea of being near Holly. He wasn't obliged to hurry back to Montana, that could be fixed by wire. His nerves tingled as if the air was electrically charged.

"I appreciate your offer," he told Ferris warmly, "but you surprised me. I wasn't looking for a—" Dixon checked himself, not wanting to explain his interest in that particular country. "I wasn't expecting you would need a man," he amended.

"The cattle have got to be shoved up on Juniper Mountain as soon's we can gather 'em. Lots of grass and water on the moun-

tain but our desert range'll dry up mighty soon. Take the night to think it over. I can give you first-class pay, and I'd like it if you could stay on till after fall roundup."

"So far as I'm concerned, it's a deal now," Dixon declared impulsively.

"Fine!" Ferris exclaimed with satisfaction.

"I'll ride that livery horse to Three Wells in the morning, get my car and should be back here tomorrow night," Dixon said.

AS HE SPOKE a big touring car turned from the narrow dirt road paralleling the creek and swept in the direction of the ranch house. Even in the dusk it showed up as an expensive job. The driver turned in short near the steps, braked to a stop and got out with an important swing of his shoulders. Burr guessed he was around fifty though a thick crest of blond hair showed no grey.

"It's Paul Hendrix, Senator Cal's son," Ferris mumbled hastily.

When greetings and introductions were concluded, the newcomer said, "I promised my father I'd drop by and have a talk with you, Ben."

"Sure, sure. talk ahead," Ferris encouraged. "What's on your mind?"

"Well—er—" Hendrix glanced at Dixon —"it's a business matter. . . . Concerning the Springs," he added when Burr, taking his cue from the rancher, made no move to leave his chair.

"I settled the Springs question with Cal," Ferris said. his voice and manner taking on definite firmness. "Medicine Hot Springs is not for sale at any price."

"So we understand," Paul Hendrix agreed affably. "But since it seems you have decided to operate the Springs on a business basis, I am empowered to make you a different proposition, one we believe will be satisfactory."

"Humph!" Ferris ejaculated. "Does beat all how news gets about. Ain't been a word said about that outside the family, till a coupla days ago when Holly went into Wilder to get a man or two to come out and help fix up around there. An' you fellers hear about it in the Capitol!"

"Everybody knows this is Hendrix country," Paul said with a tinge of arrogance, "and naturally we're interested in whatever goes on. It's also natural for father to take active part in developing its resources. Since he is about to retire from an active political life, he will be in an excellent position to make Medicine Springs a place of note. He will pay you five thousand dollars for their use and control until the first of October, with on option to renew the lease for a further period, at whatever rate you mutually agree upon, if the project gives promise of success." He spoke glibly, as if confident of putting over his proposition.

"Five thousand dollars," Ferris said in an obviously restrained voice. "That's a lot of money."

Paul shrugged. "Properly handled, the springs will pay out," he said.

"Uh-huh," Ferris grunted. "You'll exploit 'em. Set up a fancy resort that'll be crawlin' with rich dudes an' playboys! You'll crowd out the folks that's been coming there for mebbe half their lifetime for a week or so in the summer. Folks that tell me it's taking baths in them springs that sets 'em up for another year. Mebbe they can't afford much for doctorin', but they can make a pilgrimage to the springs. Sorta like the Indians usta, to make medicine and get a fresh stand-in with the gods they reckoned hung around these mountains and kept the caves and that water warm.

"Them kind of folks is going to keep on coming as long as I live," he continued vehemently. "There's so many folks travelin' around the country these days, that last year we got cluttered up with a bunch that didn't have no real need to be at a hot springs and made a lot of trouble around the ranch. That's why I decided to fix it so's we could keep things under control. I've turned the bossing job over to Holly. She needs something to keep her busy, and she feels like I do about Medicine Springs. She won't let 'em be spoiled nor put prices no higher than it needs to pay for the fixin' up. I guess that's putting it plain enough so you can make your father understand."

PAUL HENDRIX had been moving restlessly in his chair, biting hard on the cigar between his teeth. "Maybe we can make a deal with Holly," he suggested. "We would take over all the fixing up, under her direction, for the privilege of putting in a couple of cabins to be used by our friends."

"Afraid I couldn't agree to that," Holly said from the doorway where she had come to stand quietly during the latter part of her grandfather's speech. "Two bosses wouldn't be a good line-up. But if you have

friends who would like to spend some time there, I'll fix it so they can either have camping space, or a cabin. We're going to put up three extra cabins and open up Rainbow Cave again, the big one on the end, where the wall caved in during the Big Storm. Work will start tomorrow."

Dixon liked the manner in which she put over that she was boss and meant to take no interference. She was all business without being hard-boiled.

Hendrix shrugged again with an obvious effort to control an emotion much stronger than disappointment. A jerky movement of his arm shot the chewed cigar out into the yard. "Sorry," he said curtly. "Seems to me, Ben, we've proved ourselves good neighbors. Dad surely gave plenty of evidence of that on a certain occasion some twenty-five years ago, that you can't have forgotten!"

Dixon caught a smothered exclamation of anger from Holly.

But Hendrix went on emphatically. "These facts added to the importance of our position in the Sate, should give us some right to decide how a spot like the Springs should be operated. I take great exception to your answer to our more than fair proposition."

"You have been good neighbors," Ferris replied in an even tone, "and I do not forget your father's attitude at the time you mention. But I do not consider that either fact justifies your control of any part of my ranch. Let this settle the question, Paul."

"It does," he assented, the words coming from his rigid lips with a snap. Then he turned to the doorway to speak to Holly in a totally different tone. "Les came with me," he said significantly. "You'll be seeing him first thing tomorrow. He was terribly fussed up because I stopped him from coming along tonight." Hendrix laughed with a geniality in sharp contrast to his recent manner. "I told him that business didn't mix with the kind of call he was going to make."

Dixon liked neither Hendrix's manner nor the implication that "Les," whoever he was, had a special relationship with Holly. She made no comment. But there was a tautness about her figure against the living room light, something in the pose of her head that warned it wouldn't take much to strike hot sparks from her temper.

Hendrix went to his car, shoulders swinging with something more than arrogance. Was it a threat? Dixon guessed that the Hendrix outfit was inflated to the exploding point with their own importance. The evening air seemed clearer, pleasanter to inhale, when the Senator's son drove away.

Instead of coming out on the porch, as Dixon had hoped, Holly told them good night and disappeared. Ferris was preoccupied and made no objection when Dixon remarked that he'd just as soon turn in. The ranch owner went with him to the bunkhouse, a substantial building with a bed in each of its corners. Pat Crowley and Ranny received the new member of the crew enthusiastically, Rufe Prettyman with characteristic indifference.

AFTER his companions had gone to sleep, Burr Dixon lay for some time looking from a window that afforded a view of the dooryard and main house. He was drifting into the edge of unconsciousness when he dimly heard the droning throb of an airplane motor. He was too dulled mentally to question a plane being over that country, considerably off the main air routes. The buzzing grew louder, coughed abruptly, then stopped short to come back with a series of explosive snorts before dying out completely. It was a crashing and splitting of wood, the clang of metal, that aroused Dixon. Instantly wide awake, he sat up. The moon shone through the windows showing complete calm within the cabin. From without came further cracking sounds and a hoarse shouting.

Stamping his feet into his boots, he grabbed his pants, dragging them on as he sprang for the door.

"Pat! Ranny! Wake up!" he yelled. "There's a plane down in the yard!"

A light went on in Ben Ferris's room as Dixon raced towards the big cottonwood into which the airplane seemed to have dropped. One wing thrust out from the foliage, tip drooping nearly to the ground.

The main part of the plane was tangled with a mass of broken branches and thick leaves.

Dixon shouted encouragement to a man who wriggled from some part of the wreckage to cling, face-down, to a cottonwood limb.

"The pilot! Get him out!" he cried hoarsely.

"Hold still!" Dixon said. "We'll get him."

The cowboys were coming on the run, Ferris hurrying from the house, Holly close on his heels. Ferris threw the beam of his big flashlight in the tree, revealing that the plane had nosed into the thickest of branches, missing the trunk and lodging none too securely. It looked as if any second it might roll sidewise.

Dixon grabbed a limb on the undamaged side of the tree and swung himself up to a position from which he could see into the tilted cockpit. A youngish man was huddled there, head drooping, with his chin against his chest.

"Don't try to climb over on that side," he warned the man clinging to the branch. "Mustn't jar the wreck till we get that guy out. I don't think he's dead. Any more of you in the plane?"

"No, just Latimer and myself," was the reply. "My name's Dingle."

"Not Fred Latimer?"

"Yes."

Fred Latimer, wealthy sportsman who was the hero of a number of publicised flights, was one of the men who made news. It looked as if he'd come plenty close to getting his last headline.

"You get on down to the ground, if you can, Dingle," Dixon said, adding crisp directions to the men grouped below. "Somebody get a rope and blanket. Ranny, you climb up here by me on that branch to the right. I'll brace myself and haul Latimer out, then you'll have to help get him in a sling and lower him."

He braced one knee in a crotch formed by the cottonwood trunk and a strong branch. Then he arranged a loop of the rope around the trunk in such a manner that it would support his weight as he leaned forward and down into the partly crushed cockpit. Ranny crouched nearby.

"When I lift him high enough," Dixon directed, "grab hold around his thighs and help me balance him on this branch. I'll hold him there while you get the blanket around him. We'll swing him down to rest on that lower limb, then from there on to the ground."

The group below watched in silence broken only by Aunt Della's alarmed gasps when the wreckage shifted slightly as the men worked. Once Dixon caught a glimpse of Holly's intent, upturned face. Nez Bah stood a little to one side, hands clasped over her breast, the reflected light striking strange glints from her eyes.

"He's alive!" Dixon announced presently. "I can't tell how much he's hurt."

When the blanket-cradled form was lowered carefully from the tree, Dingle took command. "I'm a doctor," he said, stooping for a close look at Latimer's face. "I think he's coming out of it. Carry him into the house where I can see how bad the damage is."

When they arrived in the living room, Latimer's eyes were open. He looked up curiously at his bearers. "So we made it," he murmured.

"Sure we made it," Dingle told him cheerfully. "That was a damn clever stunt the way you brought us down so we only nipped a few bouquets out of a tree."

THE DOCTOR wasn't much over five feet in height and only a robust build and strong neck kept his head from seeming oversize. Similarly it was the bright keenness of his eyes that gave character to a round, moonlike face. Dixon noticed Rufe Prettyman staring at Dingle with slack jaw and eyes that at last had expression—an expression of panic. As if that panic automatically commanded his muscles, he retreated with silent swiftness until the substantial body of Ben Ferris blocked him from the doctor's view.

"Two rib fractures and some bruises," Dingle said. "They won't take you out of circulation."

"Good," Latimer replied with the grin for which his newspaper pictures had made him famous. "When that engine started kicking up, I figured on a fractured head."

While the broken ribs were being taped, the women went into the kitchen to make coffee and sandwiches. When the men joined them, Rufe Prettyman was missing from the group.

"First time I ever knew him to pass up a feed," Ranny exclaimed. "He musta been really scared to lose his appetite!"

He had been, Dixon thought, not by the accident but of being seen by the doctor.

Latimer couldn't account for the engine trouble that had forced the landing. "Doc's having his first vacation in four years," he said. "Told me he wanted a complete change. I said if he took this hop with me he'd get a totally different experience, something really new."

"I did," Dingle replied drily, "and still am. Never was on a ranch before and the nearest I've come to this country was when I took a friend's practice in the Capitol for a few weeks."

"Since you were dropped into Medicine Ranch dooryard, why not spend the rest of your vacation here?" Ferris suggested. "Good place to rest and everybody in the outfit's so darned healthy you won't have to work at doctorin'."

"Might take you up on that," Dingle replied thoughtfully.

"How about you?" Ferris asked Latimer.

"Thanks," he replied. "I'll have to pull out as soon's I see how much of the plane can be salvaged and get somebody to take it away."

NEITHER Latimer nor the doctor appeared at the early breakfast next morning. Rufe ate hurriedly, then took off for the corrals with a haste that drew amazed stares from Pat and Ranny.

Pat shook his red head solmenly. "That wasn't no mosquito I heard buzzin' around in the bunkhouse last night, it must of been a ambition bug, and it stung Rufe. First time I ever saw him in a hurry to saddle up and get to work."

When the cowboys rode out, Dixon started for Three Wells. He followed a route that Ferris had assured him was the shortest. After some three hours of steady going he arrived in the little town where he had left his car. He went first to the Western Union office to send a wire. This was addressed to a northern Montana town, to Henry Dixon.

I AM STAYING FOR SUMMER ON MEDICINE RANCH WRITE ME THERE. LETTER WITH DETAILS FOLLOWS.

When he turned in the horse, Wes Kinney, the livery keeper, was friendly and talkative. "You're going to work for Ferris, eh? Old Ben's a grand feller. He's got a big-time neighbor, too, Senator Hendrix. That's a guy that's hit the high spots from a ranch way back in the mountains. And now I s'pose his son Paul will step into Cal's shoes after the next election. That's what they're aimin' for."

"What sort of an outfit are they?" Dixon asked.

Kinney shrugged. "Chock-full of what it takes to climb pretty high in politics an' society stuff. So far's I know, they're on the level. But you savvy how it is, when a guy shams one thing, you kind of wonder if he won't sham something else, if it gives him a boost. Cal's hung onto the Bar H and makes a big play at being a catttleman, to cinch the cowmen's vote. But shucks! He don't care nothin' about raisin' cows, nothing only the show-off he gets from them fancy short-horns he breeds. He don't want nothin' but to be a big guy an' have an easy life. Paul's a lot like him."

"Paul have a family?"

"A boy an' a girl," Kinney replied, leaning one shoulder against a stall and relaxing for a comfortable gossip. "Les is twenty-five and ain't growed up yet, just a show-off kid. Carole, well she's—" he paused, shaking his head helplessly—"she's strictly high voltage. I'd just as soon try to hang onto a sky rocket that's lit and ready to go, as to play guardian for *that* girl!"

Dixon had suspected the relationship of Les to Paul Hendrix. The description didn't sound like a guy Holly would fall for, but it was hard to tell just what did make a fellow rate with a girl sometimes.

He carried her away from the cave

"Ferris seems to have a swell layout," he remarked, changing the subject to one which interested him more.

"He has, no flossy stuff, the real thing," Kinny declared emphatically. "And he's plenty solid in this country, too. Folks respect him for the way he took an awful wallop once, the kind of thing that was terrible for a four-square feller like Ben Ferris."

"What was it?" Dixon asked.

"We-ell," Kinney hesitated. "I ain't given to talkin' about that. But I reckon you'd hear it somewheres, since you're stayin' on at the ranch. You see, Ben's oldest son, Richard, was a pretty gay young feller, liked to run around and have a good time, but nobody had the least idea that Dick had a crooked fiber in him. He was awful well liked. But he held up the stage a few miles from Three Wells, killed th' driver and got away with twenty-five thousand dollars in gold and currency, that was being shipped that day. And he got clean outa the country with it."

"I'd heard something of that," Dixon said. "How did they identify the robber as young Ferris?"

"He was Dick's size, and he was ridin' a horse with a Star F brand. One of the passengers saw that. When the sheriff went to the ranch to make inquiries, Dick up an' lit out. It all happened at the begining of the nine days of the Big Storm. There never was anything like that in these parts, and folks still hate to remember it. Sheriff had to hold back the chase and that gave Dick his chance for a getaway. Everybody believes he got into Old Mexico or South America."

"That sure was a jolt for Ben Ferris," Dixon agreed. Kinney's words had handed him also a wallop.

"How'd you happen to go way over in there lookin' for a job?" the liveryman asked curiously.

"That's a long story," Burr replied, "started twenty-five years ago."

Kinney laughed. "You wasn't much more'n born then," he said. "Guess you must be one of them fellers that believes everything he does is mapped out by the stars he's born under."

DIXON accepted the interpretation of his remark and cut the talk off there. He was thoughtful as he walked up the street to the garage where he had left his car. The conversation with Kinney had added to qualms that had been disturbing him. He'd feel better if Ben Ferris knew what had brought him into that country and wished that it had been made clear to him at once. There was no substantial reason why he should not have accepted Ben's offer, yet he would be more comfortable if the ranch owner was in possession of the facts. To call attention to them now would be awkward.

He could go back to the ranch and tell Ferris word received in Three Wells made it necessary for him to return to Montana. But he knew Ferris was really up against it for help with his cattle gather. He relied on Dixon and letting him down wouldn't better the situation. Then there was Holly.

Just thinking about her brought a smile to break through the seriousness of his expression. He had been attracted to girls before, had thought some of them were tops. Never one just like Holly Ferris. One minute she seemed a little girl, the next she was fully grown up and capable. She had plenty of spunk yet wasn't too independent to accept a fellow's help. And she was mighty easy to look at, besides. She added up to something he just had to know better. Leaving now wasn't to be considered. He'd take a chance on developments.

As he went into the garage, he noticed a smart sports roadster at one side of the gas pumps where a mechanic was talking with the driver, hidden from Dixon's view.

"But I'm in a hurry to go on," a young, soprano voice was saying.

The words probably wouldn't have registered if it hadn't been for a peculiar timbre of the voice. It had the clarity of a bell tone without the music. When Dixon came out after giving the attendant directions to service his sedan with gas and oil, the girl was still arguing, and it was evident she was accustomed to having her own way.

He crossed the street to the Merchant's Café. Plenty of time to tuck in a good feed, the drive back to the ranch wouldn't take much over an hour. He'd eaten the edge

from his appetite when he noticed people at the other tables looking interestedly towards the doorway. He turned. And he continued looking, as the others were doing.

A girl had paused on the steps and was now opening the screen door and coming inside. She was tall and seemed not so much oblivious to the attention she aroused as pleased, and accepting it as her due. Her purple skirt was cut to cling to slender thighs and knees. Almost hipless, her sole curves were accented by a silky, close-fitting sweater of a bright, golden color. Her hair was almost the color of the sweater, a bright, yellow gold with a mirror like sheen. Each curl and wave was as perfect as if molded from gleaming metal. Her clear skin was almost untanned, her only color the brilliant scarlet of her mouth.

Dixon had an impression of fragility as she moved slowly forward, her glance covering the tables. It reached him and paused. She smiled. Then she came straight towards him, the smile lingering. When she got close, he saw that her eyes were blue, a shade that came just short of green.

"Mr. Dixon?" she said, in the voice he had heard at the garage.

SCARCELY waiting for his assent, she went on. "Pardon me for breaking in on your lunch. I'm terribly keen to get home, and I understand you're driving to Medicine Ranch. May I thumb a ride?" Again the smile that gave him the sensation of a spotlight being turned squarely into his eyes. As the scarlet lips lifted their corners they coaxed and commanded and flattered dizzyingly.

"Why, of course," Dixon replied. "I'll be delighted to take you."

"I got this far and something in my car went dead. The mechanic swears he can't possibly fix it before tomorrow, he has to get a part, and I just can't wait here overnight. I—" she paused to lower and lift glistening eyelashes— "I hate to trouble you."

"No trouble at all." Dixon vowed emphatically. "W-when do you want to start?"

"Any time you're ready," she said. "I ate lunch before I learned they couldn't fix the roadster. I'll wait for you at the garage." She took a step away, then turned to add, "Oh, I'm Carole Hendrix, next door neighbor of the Ferris's."

As she spoke, Dixen heard an echo of the liveryman's words—*Carole, she's strictly high voltage.*

She was, Dixon agreed. Watching her walk to the doorway, he decided that she was not fragile. The slenderness was that of a steel wire. When she disappeared he was aware that eyes which had followed her with an interested gaze now gave him surreptitious glances. He felt a stimulation as though he'd had a good shot of bourbon.

His second meeting with Carole, who was waiting for him in the garage office, was no letdown. And when she sat beside him in his car, he experienced a renewal of the intoxicated sensation.

"I'm lucky!" he exclaimed as he headed into the highway.

"Yes?" she said with a questioning inflection, her eyelashes repeating the maneuver that was so fascinating.

"Having you for a passenger," he replied, wishing he didn't have to give any attention to passing traffic.

"Is that luck?" she asked. "I'd say you've got what it takes."

"I don't get the connection," he told her.

Carole turned her head to give him the full effect of her spotlight smile. "I saw you when you came into the garage," she said, "and I took a good look while you were giving that boy your orders. That did it. I did a quick FBI job, found out your name and where you were heading, and wangled the ride."

"Oh!" he murmured. "Just like that."

"Uh-huh. That's me," she declared. "When I see anything I like in a store window, I go straight in and buy it before somebody else grabs it." Before Dixon could comment, she asked, "Now what did you think when you first saw *me*?"

"I'm just a simple cowboy," he answered, "and you've got me so tangled up I can hardly remember how to drive."

"That's a perfect answer!"

Carole was fun, and her company a welcome diversion from his recent mood. By the time they came within sight of Medicine

Ranch that was almost forgotten. They could see several men moving about the cottonwood in which the airplane had lodged, and two trucks stood close by. Coming closer, Dixon noticed that most of the wreckage was loaded to take away. Latimer and the doctor were watching, and a strange young fellow stood beside Holly Ferris. He was hatless and the sun gleamed from hair almost a perfect match for Carole's, except that it was straight.

"Les is right on the job," she said, laughing. "That's one twosome that doesn't break up when the summer ends."

"One of those associations from the little red schoolhouse and kid days, I suppose," Dixon commented.

"Oh, no," she said definitely. "My brother didn't go to school around here."

They had arrived on a line with the cotton wood and Dixon halted the car.

"Hi, there!" Carole said. "Nice to see you again, Holly!"

"Where's your car?" Les demanded. "Did you have a wreck?"

"Nope. It quit on me in Three Wells," she replied. "They couldn't fix it today. I was furious. Then—" she laid a hand on Dixon's arm— "young Lochinvar came along and whisked me off with him. And everything was fine." The implication of her expression and manner gave Dixon a slightly edgy feeling.

Holly nodded with an easy smile. But an odd sparkle glinted through the soft violet of her eyes. "That's his specialty," she said, "rescuing ladies in distress. Yesterday he whisked me home on his horse. It was fun."

FROM the corner of his eye he saw the sudden tightening of Carole's lips. But she ignored the remark. Not so her brother. He shot a surprised and plainly displeased look at Holly.

"What happened?" he exclaimed. "Did your horse throw you?"

She shook her head, still smiling but offering no explanation. Instead she said, to Carole, "Aren't you going to come in?"

"Afraid I can't now. I'll take a rain check." She glanced at Dixon, her eyes casually ordering him to drive on.

The Bar H Ranch came up to Ranny's description, and more. A gravelled drive to the steps went on around the house to a square where twenty cars could easily park between the dwelling, the garage and barns. There were imposing corrals with ornamental gates and a fancy-looking cabin he guessed was for the crew of cowpunchers.

Paul Hendrix appeared in the doorway as the car rolled up to the steps.

"Hiya, Dad!" Carole greeted him gaily, stepping to the ground with a graceful display of her legs.

"Carole!" he exclaimed in astonishment. "What brought you out here?"

"I was fed up on town," she replied, "and I thought you'd like company."

"I do," he said, eyeing her frowningly. "but what about the dance Saturday. . . and Sherwood?"

"Oh, there'll always be dances," she said with a shrug. "I thought I'd like a little springtime in the Rockies atmosphere. So I left a note for mother and took off before she woke up." Carole added a brief explanation of her car breakdown and Dixon's coming to her aid.

Hendrix paid him scant attention. He was preoccupied with his daughter's unexpected arrival, glad to see her, looking at her with pride in his ice blue eyes, yet certainly disturbed because she had come.

When Dixon had lifted her several suitcases from the car and returned to his own seat, she said, "Thanks a lot, Lochinvar." Then she stepped close enough to lean her golden head through the window as she added in a lower tone. "I'm a neighborly person—I hope *you* are!"

"Sure," he replied laughing. "Be seeing you."

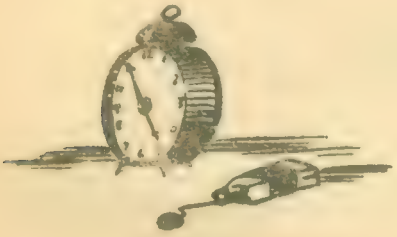
"You will," she assured him with the smile that both commanded and coaxed.

THE ROAD down the valley was on the opposite side of the creek until it reached a point slightly below the springs, where a stout log bridge spanned the stream. Dixon slowed to look across at the terraced setting of the pool and the rocky walls beyond, where the row of caves was. The spot had natural beauty. The walls were touched up here and there with

a streak of maroon or a shading of terra cotta, and there was enough greenery to soften the scene. Silvery blue threads of water came from the rocks above to cascade into the pool, from the lower end of which a small stream meandered down the terraces to fall with a light splashing into the creek.

Perhaps the springs could be developed into one of those swanky places where idlers flock in summer and pay well for the privilege. But that sort of thing wouldn't be in tune with the country. The charm of Medicine Springs was the complete lack of any sophisticated trimmings. The small log cabins looked cosy, and it was easy to see where a few tents could be set up with no crowding.

On impulse he turned back when he crossed the bridge and drove close to the pool. This was oblong, the clearness of its water revealing a sandy bottom. It was surrounded by a wall of concrete and rock with



a foot-wide rim at the top. Now that he had time to observe details, Dixon saw there were two other pools, small ones, their basins scooped from the earth. He thought of the people Ferris had said came here from year to year, people who believed that they found healing and renewal of spirit. It was that kind of a place, tranquil yet with a suggestion of strength in the rock-ribbed soil. The quiet was relieved from oppressiveness by the soft rippling of the water and an occasional flutelike bird call.

He went on to stand before the valley wall. There he saw that the massed growth to the left of the grotto where he had found Holly had been broken and bent by something forcing a way through the tangle against the piled rocks which must mark the cave-in. Bruised leaves hung wilted but not yet dried. Noting that indifferently, his gaze went back to the plank door he had closed the previous afternoon. Opening this, he stepped inside the cave, which was irregularly shaped and not large. It's roof and side walls were smooth, and he could see only a coating of light dust on the floor. There was a mark where Holly's hat had fallen and his own smudgy tracks when he went to pick it up. He had not gone back of the door, yet there were other blurry boot tracks leading there.

Stepping over, he partly closed the door and peered behind it. Since the only light in the cave came from the narrowed aperture, he squatted on his heels and lighted a match. As the flame burned bright he saw a confusion of prints but not a rock fragment even the size of a pebble. There was nothing on the cave floor but a clublike stick some two feet in length that lay between door and wall. It looked to be a section of cottonwood branch, stripped of leaves and twigs, and cut recently.

Taking it up, Dixon stood erect and opened the door wide with his other hand, his gaze fixed on the stick. Suspicions grew in his mind. He heard nothing, but turning his head instinctively, he looked through the open doorway.

Nez Bah stood outside, staring at him. Her features were impassive, but the brown eyes were stern.

"What are you doing?" she said.

"Just looking around," he replied carelessly.

"You went away from the ranch with Paul Hendrix's daughter," she said, "and now I find you here. Why did you come to this cave where Holly was hurt?"

"I told you," Dixon answered. "Now, what brought you here? I thought you said this was a bad place."

SHE WAS silent for a moment, studying his features with a gravity he found impressive. "No, it is not bad, it is good. But it is bad to change what has been placed by a power that is greater than man. I come here to look once again at this spot before this changing is made."

One slender brown hand indicated the brush thicket and piled up rocks. "It was

my mother's people who made these small pools. They came here many times to wash their clothing and their hair and their bodies in the beautiful water. And to hold ceremonies that meant much to them. My grandfather who is a very old man makes a long journey to come here, sometimes, when the moon is full. He sits by the Medicine Springs to think and to find good council. He says that he can understand things which are dark before. I am different. My father was of Spanish blood. But I know that my grandfather, Silago Nez, is a good man and a wise man, and I know that this is not like other places."

Turning, she walked slowly away, with a light swaying of her slender body. She stepped soundlessly in brown buckskin moccasins that were fastened at her supple ankles with a silver button. Dixon watched her until she swung into the saddle of a horse tied beyond the big pool, a deft motion of one leg flinging her full skirt so it hung evenly as she thrust her toes into the stirrups.

Then he gave his shoulders a vigorous shake. He felt as if her were wakening from a dream. Nez Bah's personality didn't fit into any present day pattern, but her sincerity couldn't be questioned.

His glance fell to the stick he was still holding. A growing grimness hardened his features. Suspicions hitherto vague, now became definite. The bruise, too far on the side of Holly's head to have been easily caused by anything falling from the cave roof, gave significance to the club he had found behind the door. In the grasp of somebody concealed there, it could have delivered the blow as she stepped over the threshold. Yet it seemed a fantastic idea. What motive could there have been for striking her down? Only one, that her assailant feared being seen. Perhaps it was someone who was in hiding from the law.

Turning, Dixon looked carefully about in the cave. It held no evidence of long occupancy. Dust lay untouched on the bench top. Only the blurred marks on the floor betrayed that anyone had been inside. And these proved only that there had been one other person besides Holly and himself.

Going to his car he put the stick inside the trunk. He would show it to Ben Ferris. If a fugitive was hanging around the ranch, its owner should know of it. But he would say nothing to Holly.

When he passed the end of the butte, he could see Nez Bah slanting down valley to the ranch, riding at a deliberate pace, her gaze straight ahead. Coming up the road along the creek was Les Hendrix, the silver decorated trappings of his horse reflecting sun glints, his pose in the saddle that of a show rider always conscious of his appearance.

"Thinks he's a real eyeful," Dixon thought, sizing up the tan whipcord pants and buckskin jacket that looked as if they had come straight from a smart sports shop window.

As they passed, Les gave Dixon a nod, the smallest possible gesture of recognition from one intensely conscious of his own superiority.

"Mister, I feel the same," Dixon muttered as he drove on.

WHEN he arrived at the ranch the trucks had gone, leaving behind no reminder of the previous night's plane wreck save the torn leaves and broken branches of the cottonwood, and Dr. Dingle sitting on the steps. His moon face had been thrown slightly out of shape by a walnut-sized swelling on his left jaw, his only outward mark of the accident. When Burr passed on his way to the bunkhouse, Dingle waved a hand, got to his feet and followed.

"I decided to stay on," he said genially. "If it wasn't for Fred's smashed plane, I'd say I'm glad we lit in that tree. Otherwise I'd have missed seeing this remarkably interesting place."

They talked while Dixon unloaded his saddle and suitcase. He had just finished when the three cowboys rode into the corral nearest the barn. Swinging the saddle to his shoulder, he headed that way. Might as well put it with the other men's stuff, since he'd be riding out with them in the morning. The doctor went with him, his short legs moving fast to keep up with Dixon's long strides. As they approached, Rufe Prettyman gripped his horse's bridle

with a jerk that swung that animal half-around. The move partly blocked Dingle's view of Rufe, and the cowpuncher tilted his head so the wide brim of his hat concealed his features. The movement was so obvious Dixon was completely convinced Prettyman was mighty keen to avoid Dingle's recognition. But the others seemed not to have noticed the maneuver.

"Ben get back yet?" Pat asked.

"Looks like the pickup coming up the creek now," Ranny said, "and Ben's got a couple fellows in with him."

"Good!" Pat exclaimed. "We sure need extras tomorrow, if we brand them calves."

Dixon heard their words vaguely, his attention centering on Rufe, who succeeded in evading Dingle's notice until the horses had been run into the enclosure. Keeping his back to the others, Rufe was fastening the gate when the doctor stepped to his side.

"That's an ingenious arrangement," he remarked.

Dixon saw Rufe stiffen, bracing himself to meet whatever it was he feared. Dingle's glance lifted to the sun-browned features as he asked a question. When the cowpuncher replied, the doctor nodded understanding, his expression revealing no other reaction. Rufe's glance slid over Dingle's face, the tip of his tongue wetting lips that had been tight and dry.

Had Prettyman betrayed less tension, the incident would have seemed inconsequential. But Dixon's curiosity had been aroused sufficiently so that he watched at the supper table for any interest the doctor might betray in Rufe. There was none. Dixon wondered if he was too clever for such self-betrayal. The moon shape of his face gave him a look of frankness. But his eyes were as keen as stilettos, and he had a way of closing his lips that indicated rigid self-control.

Ferris had brought two men from Wilder, the nearest town, to help through the roundup and branding. He seemed tired and hadn't much to say except to Holly who talked eagerly about her plans for the Springs.

"Zeb and Hank Ball will be out tomorrow morning to start work," he told her, "but the lumber won't be delivered for a couple of days. They can clear away the stuff from the cave-in before they begin setting up the cabins."

"Just what I want them to do," she replied. "I can scarcely wait to see the inside of Rainbow Cave."

NEXT morning the sun was barely above the long, black skyline that flanked the valley on the east, when the men rode out from the ranch headed for the breaks on the west side of Singing Water. As they went along Ferris explained the lay of the land for the benefit of Dixon and the two extra men who were unfamiliar with the range. He pointed to a long, flat-bottomed draw that terminated near the creek, some distance down country.

"That's Eby Gulch," he said. "We'll bunch there, on the flat." Turning, he considered his riders for a moment. "Pat, you take Ashley with you. Gleason, you go along with Ranny. Burr, you and Rufe can take off together." Thus each new man had a partner acquainted with the range. "You scatter 'em, Pat," Ferris concluded. "I'll poke along close in."

When they arrived at the point where they were to separate, Pat directed, "Rufe and Burr ride the Eby Gulch breaks, we'll swing on south."

While they were riding towards the far edge of the circle they were to cover, Rufe fell back alongside Dixon. Burr was aware that the expressionless eyes glanced at him with a frequency that betrayed curiosity. He wasn't surprised when the cowpuncher asked bluntly, "Where was it you said you was from?" When Burr replied, he remarked, "That's a considerable ways from here. Was jobs scarce in Montana?"

"I wouldn't say so."

"How'd you happen to come way down in here?" Rufe asked.

"Well, you could say it was wanting to see new country, to have some new experiences," Dixon replied.

Rufe grunted. "Seems kinda queer, you ridin' to hell'n'gone to come into th' valley by the back way, you might say. Then you land a job with Ben right off the bat."

Prettyman's manner and his questioning

irritated Dixon. He turned to look squarely into the expressionless eyes. "Lots of things are queer," he said. "Take Latimer's plane, off the air trails and coming down here, dumping him and Dingle right in the ranch yard. If you were superstitious, you could say some mysterious force drew the plane down so those fellows would be at this particular spot." Dixon noted the tightening of Rufe's jaw muscles as he rambled on. "Latimer pulled out. But the little Doc, he stayed on, just as if he—"

"What d' you mean?" The demand came from Prettyman's thick throat like a menacing growl. "Dingle stayed on here for *what*?"

"Because he liked it a lot, one of those guys that fall hard for ranch stuff," Dixon replied as if he didn't notice Rufe's manner. But he'd gotten a rise out of the cowpuncher. Not that it mattered, except that he'd stopped Rufe's prying.

He fell into a silence that lasted until they reached the tip of a ridge point. There he indicated the piece of range Burr should ride, while he swung to the left to go down a different draw to the bunch ground.

When Dixon got in with his drive, he found the branding fire made and a half a dozen irons getting hot. But it was well into the afternoon before the last calf was roped, branded and ear marked.

FERRIS laid down his iron and straightened with a slow, stiff movement that betrayed the complete weariness of age. "We'll throw 'em in the lower pasture tonight," he said. "We oughta finish gathering and branding 'em by noon tomorrow, then we'll start putting the dry stuff on the mountain."

Dixon rode near Ferris on the way back to the ranch. The old man's shoulders sagged and strain tightened the lines in his face. Burr thought of his discovery at the cave but decided not to mention it then. Whoever had been lurking around the Springs would be gone; no use bothering Ben about it now when he was all in.

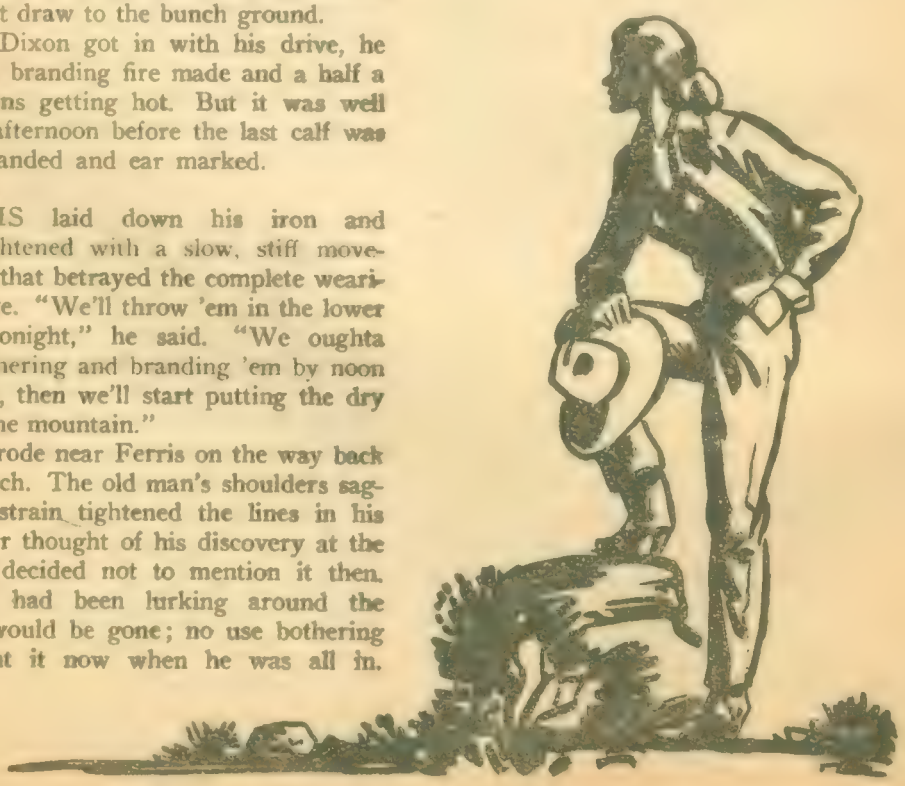
Lingering near the well when the other cowpunchers returned to the bunkhouse, Dixon managed a few words with Holly.

"How's your project coming on?" he asked.

"Fine," she replied. "Zeb and Hank can't work tomorrow—they promised to do a job in town. But they stopped on the way in tonight to tell me they had cleared away enough rock to get a look inside Rainbow Cave. Nez Bah saw it when she was a little girl and says it's beautiful. The walls are shades of slick, red rock with one streak of glistening white. She'll never forget the big storm that closed the cave." Holly sighed. "That was a dreadful time for all the country around, of course, but worse for Medicine Ranch."

"I've heard something of that," Burr said, pausing for the right words to put over to Holly the link with that long ago time that had brought him into the neighborhood, now. She spoke again too quickly.

"You would hear of it in Three Wells," she said. "Folks wouldn't forget that,



though it wouldn't be mentioned to us. I never speak of it to anybody but Nez Bah or Aunt Della. She tries to forget what my Uncle Dick did. She loved him so very, very much. Nez Bah insists that there were *chind-dees*—evil spirits—around here at the time and that they worked their evil with Dick and made the terrible storm. The mountain of the hot springs was so angry it moved and caused Rainbow Cave to fall in, as a reminder to everyone of the power of evil. That's why she is so against my having the cave reopened."

"When I think about Nez Bah," Dixon said, "she doesn't seem real. Then I see her, and she's so real she almost scares me!"

"I know how you feel," Holly told him. She had lifted her face so the moonbeams revealed the soft contours of her cheeks and the rounded chin. "Nez Bah never pretends. She's had school education but keeps many of the superstitions of her mother's people. Her father was a Spanish vaquero, working for Grandad when he married her mother. They lived on the ranch till he died and the mother went back to her relatives. Nez Bah stayed with Aunt Della and helped her take care of me. My mother died when I was born."

BY THAT TIME Dixon was unable to concentrate on Holly's words. The perfume of her hair, the soft cadences of her voice, her red, sweetly curved lips absorbed his consciousness.

"Holly!" he exclaimed, taking a step nearer to her.

His earnest gaze drew and held hers in the violet eyes dark and mysterious in the moonlight. Her breath quickened as an impelling awareness of each other passed like an electric current between them.

"Burr!" Her lips formed his name soundlessly.

Her hands went to meet his as a car came swooping into the yard from the creek road, headlights drenching them with brilliant light. Screeching brakes brought it to a quick stop.

"Hi, Holly!" Les Hendrix called. "That you?" He stepped to the ground and came swiftly towards them. "I've got to drive over beyond Three Wells tomorrow, to look over some saddle horses for Dad. I want you to go along."

"Oh, I couldn't tomorrow," Holly replied. "Too much to do here."

"Sure you can," Les insisted, laying an arm across her shoulders and drawing her in the direction of the house. He ignored Dixon. "I'll put it up to Della," Les went on. "She'll tell you to go along."

Dixon gazed after them, catching bits of the argument that proved how well they must know each other. Ten seconds earlier he had been about to kiss Holly. She wasn't rebuffing him. Now that damned, blond wolf had horned in and spoiled everything.

Waves of intoxicating warmth still chased back and forth through Dixon's long, sturdy body. If it wasn't love, it sure was something plenty powerful. And Holly had touched off the tumult that was shaking him from his forelock to his toes. It didn't soothe him to remember how quickly she had stepped back when Les drove in, how calmly she had answered him. Didn't act as if she was as carried away as he.

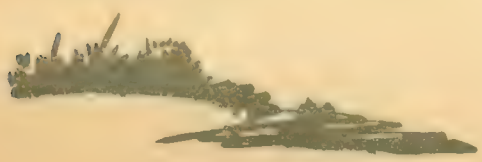
He went glumly to the bunkhouse. Come to think of it, maybe he'd been too hasty. He might have pulled a boner that would have made Holly mad. He guessed kissing wouldn't be merely a game to Holly.

Next morning when they were saddling up. Dr. Dingle strolled over to the corral.

"Want to go along?" Ferris asked. " 'Tain't far to the bunch ground and you can set around there while the boys are gathering the stuff and brandin'."

"I believe I'll poke around easy for a bit," the doctor replied, "before I tackle riding with you fellows."

He watched with evident interest the snaring of each horse by his rider, the careful smoothing of saddle blankets and the upward swing of saddles that were set just so. Moving casually about, he paused beside Prettyman while Rufe's blunt fingers drew up and fastened his cinch.



HOLLY came from the house, her glance going straight to Dixon.

"Will you cut out the little black and throw him in the small corral?" she asked. "I'll ride him by and by."

She looked on while he built up a loop and sent it spinning over the head of the nimbled-footed black as the horse reared to avoid capture. Watching Dixon, she realized that in his presence her nerves tingled in an entirely new way. Memory took a quick jump back to the previous night—the moonlight on Burr Dixon's face, the shining look in his black-lashed eyes. If Les hadn't broken in, what would have happened, she wondered with a flop of her heart that made her breath come more quickly. Something of her tingling excitement was in her voice when she thanked Dixon. But her manner was casual. And she turned to the doctor as the men got into their saddles and headed down the valley, missing the glance Burr sent back to her.

"I believe I'll take a ride, after I write a letter," Dingle said. "If I can have a horse that won't cut fancy didoes."

"I'll saddle Daisy for you when you're ready," Holly answered. "She's easy-gaited and steady as a church. If you get lost, she'll bring you home."

It was mid-forenoon before Holly started for the Springs. But there would be plenty of time before noon to see what progress the men had made the previous day. On the way up the valley she looked around for Dingle but he was not in sight. When she rounded the end of the butte she saw the bare spot where the brush thicket had been cleared away from the wall, in which a black spot indicated the opening the men had made through the rubble of the old cave-in. Rocks and dirt were still piled on the ground to a height of about three feet; above that the opening extended to the grotto roof. The sun wasn't yet shining inside, but there was light enough for a fair inspection of the dim and dusty interior.

Tieing her horse nearby, Holly scrambled over the rubble to a spot midway of the opening. She could discern richly colored, semi-circular walls and a domelike ceiling. It was irritating not to have a better view. Just a narrow doorway would allow her to step inside. At her right was a spot where a little work with pick and crowbar would open a way, and the tools stacked nearby were a temptation. If a certain thin slab were loosened, several chunks of rocks would fall and could be shoved aside. She could do that herself. And she would have the first real look inside Rainbow Cave for twenty-five years.

Rolling up the sleeves of her blouse, she set to work. As she had figured, a determined attack with the iron bar loosened the wedge, and as she jumped back, a dozen or so chunks of rock and considerable small stuff cascaded from the partly demolished barrier. When the dust subsided, she pried more rocks loose and raked them to one side, leaving an opening through which she could enter the cave. Standing there, she wished she had brought a flashlight. Up over the roof, down over the rear wall and across the floor her gaze swept to halt suddenly, chills running up and down her spine.

Holly closed her eyes, then opened them to stare at a spot beyond the left edge of the opening. She could see the soles, heels and half of the uppers of a pair of boots. Dust covered them thickly yet they were perfectly indentifiable as such. They weren't empty boots. She could tell that by the way they were lying.

Holly forced herself to take a step forward to take a look around the rubble that concealed whatever else lay there with the boots. The shadow was dense behind the partly demolished barrier but she could see a dark blotch and something light. Bones, perhaps. She drew back, shivering.

SOMEONE must have been caught inside the cave when the front wall fell inward. One of the several people known to have perished in the storm might have taken refuge there, was perhaps sleeping from exhaustion. He could have been imprisoned, helpless to make his escape, or killed by some of the falling rock. Holly took one more look at the boots, then she went to her horse.

The men hadn't returned though the big clock in the living room corner intoned twelve resonant strokes as she hurried into the house. Aunt Della listened in amazement to her story.

"Don't that beat all!" she exclaimed. "I remember there were two cowpunchers lost during the peak of the storm, likely one of 'em got into Rainbow Cave."

Nez Bah's eyes were round and solemn.

"You see, it's a good thing we had that cave opened," Holly told her.

She replied only with a shake of her head and a doubtful look.

Sounds from the corral announced the arrival of the men.

"We'll hurry and dish up," Della said. "Ben'll want to eat quick and take a look at the cave."

A moment later he appeared in the doorway. "Waiting for Rufe to come in with his stuff made us late," Ferris said. "Pat finally went to round him up. They'll probably finish the branding before they come."

"The doctor isn't in either," Della told him. "Do you suppose anything's happened to him?"

"Nope," Ferris replied. "That's a fellow who likes to go his own way and knows how to take care of himself."

While he washed up at the sink, Holly told him of her tragic discovery.

"I'll go up there as soon's we eat," Ben said with the stern, controlled expression that always came to his face at any reference to the time of the Big Storm.

The others had come in while Holly was talking, and Ranny was so excited he would have passed up dinner to start at once for the Springs. They were sitting down to the table when Dingle appeared. His hands were dirty, his clothing dusty, and he had a mussed up look unusual for him.

He smiled, "I got off my horse to examine some interesting rock formations," he explained, "slipped and went tumbling to the gulch bottom. No damages, though."

"Huh! Wait till you hear what happened to Holly!" Ranny exclaimed. "She found a dead man, a skeleton."

"A *what?*" Dingle asked with a startled expression, wholly changing his normal calm, pleasant look.

Ferris explained. "I'd like to have you come along up there," he concluded, "while we investigate Holly's find."

When they left the table, he said, "We'd better take the pickup."

"I'll drive!" Holly exclaimed. "Don't say no, Grandad. I'll let you men do the investigating, but I'm going along."

Ferris and the doctor got into the wide seat with Holly, the others, including Dixon, piled into the rear of the truck. "Come along, if you like," Ben told Ashley and Gleason. "'Twon't take but a few minutes to run up there."

Holly drove past the pool as close as possible to the cave mouth. Ben Ferris got out stiffly. Ranny was already leaping for the opening, a flashlight in his hand.

"There's the boots!" he exclaimed. He sprang inside and turned on the light. "Hi!" he yelled, his voice breaking on a shrill note. "This ain't no skeleton, it's Rufe!"

"My God!" Ferris ejaculated, hurrying his stiff strides.

Holly jumped from the truck and ran towards the cave.

Ferris blocked her way as Dixon stepped up behind Ranny, who stood staring downwards, flashlight gripped by a rigid hand.

"It's Rufe, all right," Dixon said.

"It *can't* be!" Holly exclaimed.

"You didn't see anything but the boots," her grandfather told her. "You were excited and naturally thought they were on somebody who had been caught in there by the cave-in."

"Mebbe you think he changed his boots, or wiped 'em off!" Ranny suggested with a giggle of hysteria.

"Move back!" Ferris ordered sternly. "Stay where you are, Holly!"

Taking the torch, he stepped inside the

cave and dropped to his knees beside the body which was concealed from the others by the debris pile.

"His skull is crushed in," Ferris said. "Look here, Doc!"

A moment later Dingle stated his opinion tersely. "He hasn't been dead long. Probably killed not long before Holly found him."

"Slugged from behind then dropped through the opening," Ferris said, rejoining the group outside the cave. "But what could have brought him into this neighborhood, nowheres near where he was riding circle? Who saw him later?"

"I suppose I did," Dixon replied. "We were paired off again today. Rufe left me about three hours before we came into the ranch for dinner, to ride a different gulch."

The other men shook their heads solemnly. None of them had glimpsed Prettyman since early morning.

"He must've ducked across the creek and cut around back of the ranch, over the ridge, then come down here," Ranny said excitedly.

"But why?" Ferris asked. "Why should he go to the Springs?"

Holly stood white-faced and tense, staring at the booted feet that were just visible through the opening.

"They don't look the same," she insisted. "I can't understand it, but I'm sure these aren't the same boots I saw the first time."

"Listen child," Ferris said firmly. "You were too shocked to be sure of anything. Get into the truck, now, drive to the house and phone the sheriff. Tell him there's been a murder here and I want him to come as fast as he can."

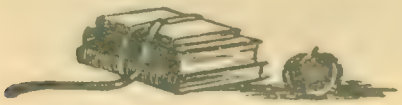
(To be continued in the next issue)

Coming up in the next issue

Ambush at Chimney Rocks

A Stirring Novelette of a Cow Country Marriage Celebrated in Gunsmoke

By ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS



All in the Book

A Lively Short Story of a Cowpoke Who Read as He Ran—into Battle

By CHANDLER WHIPPLE

She Led the Wagon Train

The True Tale of One of the Dauntless Women Who Settled the West

By FERRIS M. WEDDLE

LAW ABIDIN'

By Lulita Crawford Pritchett

She recognized the state seal on the envelope

JO ALBERTSON had never before been in the clutches of the law, but she was now. Bud Thorne, the game warden, was marching her in to the old J. P. who held office in the back of the town's one café. It was noon, and the place was crowded with customers—big Ruck Helstern and some of his men who had been trucking out sheep, and a busload of passengers bound for Salt Lake. Jo flushed and bit her lip as the brawny trucksters whistled at her.

"What you got there, Bud? A prisoner?"

"Shore bagged you some bird, Bud! What's she done?"

Bud Thorne's lips curved in their habitual smile, and his pale eyes gleamed under their sandy brows with a self-satisfied expression. "Howdy, boys. Gotta learn these people. Pick up your feet, gal."

Jo had stumbled over a broken chair rung. A man at a nearby table put out a hand to steady her. "Wope!" he said. "Hurt you, ma'am?" Wind-browned and big-boned, he did not look like a truckster or a tourist. Jo thought he was a drifting cowboy.

She shook her head. "Thanks," she said, and marched on. Jo was scared and ashamed. Bud Thorne had been a sure-enough thorn in her flesh for almost a year now, always snooping around the ranch, trying to hang something on Jo and her

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THE FIRST time in court, Jo never thought she could enjoy being in the clutches of the law

crippled old pa and her hot-headed young brother, Dan.

There was plenty of game killed out of season in this remote section of Colorado—everybody knew that. You couldn't exactly blame a rancher for shooting the elk that ate hay needed for cattle. Old Sam, the previous game warden, had been human. He had shut his eyes to some things, but now Sam was gone, and this Bud Thorne was carrying out the letter of the law.

Pa Albertson had warned his children time and again to walk the straight and narrow. He had learned the hard way in his youth for he had lost one arm dynamiting fish. He had been stern with red-headed, seventeen-year-old Dan, who did not feel like going hungry when there was plenty all around him, and he was only a a little less stern with slim, dark-eyed Jo who made a home of the crude cabin on the bank of Willow Creek.

But today Jo had made a slip. She had caught a trout that was an inch too small in a beaver pond. Though she had taken it off her hook and thrown it back, as the law demanded, it had floated belly up, dead, and she had retrieved it. Food was too scarce, and anyway it was a sin to waste anything so hard come by.

Fish in Willow Creek were few and far between since Ruck Helstern had moved his thousands of sheep into the forest. Talk about law! Ruck hated law. Jo knew for a fact that the herders had seined the trout by the hundred and thrown away the ones that were too small to bother with. So she had put the trout in her basket and gone on fishing.

INTENT on her casting, she did not see Bud Thorne till he stood over her reciting piously, "Game and fish inspection!" There was nothing pious about his grin as he reached in her basket, found the evidence, measured it, and made out a warrant.

Jo might have pled with some other man, but not with Bud. She hated him too much. Stiffly she stood, the fall wind whipping her hair, and said no word as he squatted in the grass writing on his knee. Silently she rode into town in his green truck, hands twisted together in her lap. She would not let Bud see her cry.

A year ago, when she had first met him, that grin of his had fooled her. Bud had been new in the country then. He had stopped his truck at the gate one day to inquire the way to Ruck Helstern's. It so happened Pa and Dan were away hunting lost cattle, but Jo had smiled back and invited him into the cabin.

Strangers in these remote hills were always welcomed, warmed and fed. She got dinner for Bud while he lolled in the one rocking chair, and after dinner she had pointed out the road over the ridge. But he had not gone. He had forced her back in the cabin and kissed her and had things his own way till she managed to grab Pa's gun from the wall bracket. Then she had stood him off. "Get—get out of here!"

Even then his grin had not disappeared completely. "You'll change your tune," he had sneered. "I'm out to git the parties that's killin' elk. I've heard your brother's mixed up in it. 'Course, if you was to be my sweetheart I could look t'other way—"

All winter he had hounded the Albertsons. Even without him snooping around it would have been bad enough, for the elk came down from the hills and ate the hay till there was not enough to see the cattle through and half of them starved to death. Dan had rebelled and gone out with his gun and Jo didn't know what he'd done, but when he'd come home Pa had horsewhipped him.

Now Bud had Jo where he wanted her. The J. P. was Bud's uncle—a frowsy old fellow with syrup on his vest. The J. P.'s wife ran the cafe. "That'll be twenty-five dollars and costs," rasped the old justice.

"You know I haven't any money," said Jo tensely.

Bud looked at her faded and patched jeans, at the cracks in her shoes. "Yeah, I know," he said with pleasure.

"Jail'll learn her," suggested the J. P.

"I'll give her a break," said Bud. "She can inform on her brother's elk poachin'—" he saw the flash in Jo's eyes and ended vindictively—"or she can work out her fine here in the cafe. Aunt Suze needs a gal to wait table."

WHAT else could Jo do? With icy hands she donned the apron scrawny Aunt Suze gave her. It was not for herself she was afraid. She could stand Bud's leering gaze; she could work out her fine. But what of Pa and Dan? Pa had put up a brave fight, believing right and justice would eventually triumph. He had done the work of ten men till he'd wrenched his back and now could barely hobble around the house. This would be one more thing to finish him.

Bud, who used the law to satisfy his personal vanity, had no conception of broad principles of justice. He'd as soon as not see the Albertsons bankrupt. That's just about what they were right now, for with few cattle to sell this fall there would be not enough money to pay taxes and the ranch would go—that ranch on which Pa had spent his life blood.

And what of Dan? The big plan in the Albertsons' life had been to send Dan to college. Now when Dan missed her he would see the truck tracks and follow them here in the little old jalopy he'd built out of junk. He'd bring his gun. He hated Bud anyway, and he would not stop to think of circumstances.

"Git to work, gal!" Aunt Suze said sharply.

Jo took the greasy plates and the heavy cups slopping coffee and stumbled among the tables. The truckers heckled her:

"Hello, beautiful!"

"Say, how about a date?"

Ruck bellowed, "Leave the gal be. Can't you see she's had enough? For two bits I'd bust that mealy mouthed game warden!"

"You wouldn't dare, Ruck," said Bud.

Jo escaped to the black cubby hole of a kitchen with burning cheeks. She made one or two trips to the dining room, then that broken chair hooked her again and she pitched headlong, flinging coffee at random. The cowboy leaped up with a yell as the scalding liquid hit him. Aunt Suze screeched and started for Jo, arm upraised, and Bud Thorne leaned back against the bar and smiled.

Jo crooked her elbow to shield her face from Aunt Suze's wrath, but the blow she expected never landed. A husky shoulder intervened. A pair of muscular arms set her on her feet, and a voice boomed, "Wope, now! Wope!"

"Oh, I'm so s-sorry," gasped Jo.

"That darn busted chair—you couldn't help it."

Jo could stand everything except sympathy. If he'd hollered at her or cussed her she could have hollered back. As it was, she broke completely and found herself clinging to the stranger and sobbing like a child.

Bud Thorne strode over. "Shut up, gal, and go fetch a mop. New help," he explained to the customer. "Nervous as a chickadee. I'll learn her—"

"No," growled the cowboy, "you won't! Here's money to pay her fine. I couldn't help overhearin'. That partition ain't very thick."

"Oh, so you're that kind of sucker," sneered Bud. "Well, stranger, your money ain't no good. That gal has got to—"

"Ma'am—" the stranger forcibly detached Jo— "you're free as air. If you wouldn't mind waitin' for me outside—"

JO DIVED for the door. She did not pause outside even to get her fish pole and basket but hit for the woods and a short-cut home. She might have caught a ride along the road but she didn't want to face anyone. Like a wild creature set free she ran. She should have found out who the cowboy was so she could repay him sometime. At least she could have thanked him. If Pa knew she was beholden to a strange man— Seemed like she couldn't stop blubbering for the shame of having been dragged into town by Bud. Her eyes were so blurred with tears she did not pay enough attention to where she was going and caught her foot in the rocks and fell and banged her knee. It took her the rest of the afternoon to limp home.

She dreaded to have to answer Pa's questions. He'd ask her where she'd been, where her pole was. She dreaded even more to come home empty-handed. She'd have to cook potatoes for supper again, and the doc said potatoes were not good for Pa.

Many a time Jo had come down the

trail by the corral, weary from herding cattle, and felt the enfolding warmth of the little log cabin nestled in its tiny valley, felt the peace and protection. No peace tonight. The wind skated the aspen leaves along the hard, dry path. The sunset glowed briefly, and then the air turned cold and grey. Winter would soon be here. The elk would be coming down to the haystacks. Jo shivered. Today's happenings would only make Bud more to be feared. Steeling herself, she limped into the cabin.

"I tell you, Pa, it ain't elk meat!" Dan's voice insisted.

Pa, gaunt, hollow-eyed, a shadow of the man he had been, had Dan on the carpet about something. The boy stood facing him, chin as stubborn as Pa's. "Don't lie to me, boy!"

"It ain't elk!" Dan said desperately, referring to a bulky, dark-stained flour sack on the table. "It's veal, that's what it is. Old Mac give me on account." Big as he was, he was near to tears. He had been up at crack of dawn and gone all day working for MacIntyre, the only other cattleman in the region, and now home to this. MacIntyre was notoriously close, paid wages anyone else would have been ashamed to. He skimped his own family and starved his horses. No wonder Pa was skeptical. The only reason Dan worked for him was that there was no other ranch close enough except Ruck Helstern's, and Pa would not let him work for a sheep man.

Jo put on her apron, shook down the ashes, and made a fire. For two things she was thankful—Pa was too taken up with Dan to ask her where she had been, and there was meat for supper. What if it was elk meat? It was food to fill the gnawing need of their bodies. The Albertsons needed food—even the garden had got mostly frost-killed this year. And they needed so many other things. In all her life Jo had never felt so beaten. The roaring wood fire could not seem to take off the chill that was soul-deep.

"Auto comin' up the road," observed Pa. "Must be a sheep truck goin' home."

"No, it's a little truck, and it's stopping," croaked Dan. "It's Bud Thorne!"

"No—oh, no!" gasped Jo. Not satisfied with what he'd already done today he was like a bloodhound on a trail. Well, he'd caught them dead to rights this time. The elk meat swelled in her mouth so she could not swallow it. She could not even get up and scrape the platter of evidence into the stove.

A heavy knock at the door.

"Come!" called Pa.

"'Scuse me," said a voice. "Is this Albertson's ranch?" There stood the stranger who had paid Jo's fine that afternoon! He grinned at Jo. "I come to bring back your fish pole."

"Fish pole!" frowned Pa.

Now the tale would out. "You—didn't need to bring it," stammered Jo.

"Shut the door," ordered Pa. "Come in and shut the door afore the wind breaks the lamp chimney. Now, what's this about a fish pole?"

"I shore want to thank Miss Albertson for the loan of her pole." The stranger stood hat in hand, the shadow of his long, loose-knit frame behind him on the wall. "Reckon as a fisherman I'm plumb no 'count. I jest couldn't get 'em to bite."

Jo had stiffened, went limp with relief. He wasn't going to give her away.

Pa said, "Josephine, you never mentioned nothin' about no stranger."

"No, I—"

"Couldn't git a nibble," the stranger's mellow drawl interrupted. "I'm no fisherman at all. I'm a prospector, that's what."

"Set down," invited Pa. "Jo, dish the gent some supper. What'd you say your name was?"

"Most folks calls me Tex. Tex Parker."

What if Tex recognized that elk meat? What if he was a stickler for the law? Sudden suspicion entered Jo's mind. He'd driven to the ranch in Bud Thorne's truck. Had Bud sent him here to spy? Had that scene at the cafe been acted to throw her off her guard? Narrowly she watched Tex.

He ate the meat with relish and made no comment. Pa said, "You don't look to me like no prospector. You look like a cowboy."

"Well," nodded Tex, "I've rode the range from Texas to Canada, but now I've

got me an itch to find a mine. Feller I knowed once told me about a lost mine in these mountains and I aim to have look-see."

"Sure you got the right place? This ain't mineral country."

"Might be a few miles off. What I figure to do is put in the winter prospectin'. I wonder—" he looked at Jo— "I know I hadn't ought to ask you, but could I git to stay with you folks?"

"Oh, we couldn't—" Jo began.

"I wouldn't be no trouble, ma'am," he wheedled. "And I'd pay—"

"He can have my bunk," said Dan eagerly. "I can sleep on the floor."

SO THAT was how Tex Parker came to live at the Albertson ranch. Pa and Dan accepted him for what he claimed to be, and Jo accepted him because she was beholden to him. He had a right to board out the money she owed him. When she said as much to him he grew red in the ears. "Now look," he growled, "forgit that."

"How can I? You paid my fine. The least I can do is feed you—potatoes!"

Tex had followed Jo to the spring where she had gone to fetch a bucket of water. Roughly he took the pail from her, sloshing water on both of them. He set it down and stood eyeing her. "You don't like me, do you, Jo?"

"Oh, sure." With a shrug she started to walk up the trail. He caught her by the shoulders and turned her about to face him. "Out with it," he ordered.

She tried to dodge away, but his grip was firm. "Don't you trust me, gal?"

"Trust a man who rides around in Bud Thorne's truck?"

"So that's it. I only rode once. And then I reckon I fergot to ask Bud if I could, account of he was knocked out at the time. Seems as though he'd been gittin' fresh with a waitress, and I had to sock him."

"You mean you just took the truck?"

"I had to find you somehow. I returned it to him next day, you recollect, and rented me a hoss."

"It's a wonder you didn't get arrested."

"I did, but 'twas worth it."

"You had to pay another fine?"

He nodded. "That darn old J. P.—"

Jo held out her hand. "I apologize, Tex. I guess I've just worried so much I can't think straight."

He shook her hand gravely. "Then we're square, and we can be friends?"

"Square—till I can find some way to pay you back."

PAYING Tex back was a hard thing to do for he turned the tables on her. Between prospecting trips he chopped wood, carried water, repaired the fence. And every week he laid some greenbacks on the table. Dan worshipped him from the start—"Tex, show me how you tied that hackamore—Gollee! Tell me that lion story again—" And inside two weeks Pa was joshing him the way he used to josh Dan. Tex was like one of the family.

Jo had no right to be happy with the ranch problems hanging over her and Bud

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Rustler Sign

By PHIL SQUIRES

As a rule on the cow range the trouble begins
When a man raises cows that all seem to have twins!

Thorne still on the loose and winter coming on, but she was. For the first time in her life she knew a man's companionship. Sometimes Tex rode off alone, but more often he would say, "Sunshine's a-waitin' on them hills, Jo. I'll ketch up your hoss, and you come with me."

They would rest on the ridge and fill their eyes with distance—ranges stacked off yonder and blue shimmers of lakes—only Tex's eyes were mostly on the slim girl beside him. Then they would go down through the wild meadows and watch the beaver work—only Tex's attention was often distracted by the way the wind tousled the dark head just shoulder-high to him.

Then came that wash day when Jo found the letter in Tex's shirt pocket. Keeping Tex's socks and shirts clean and mended was one thing she could do for him. She emptied cigarettes, matches—and a letter out of his pocket. She would have paid no attention to the envelope only it bore the same little green state seal that Bud Thorne's truck had painted on it. That meant Game and Fish Department. What did Tex have to do with the Game and Fish Department?

All morning the question nagged at her though she tried to shrug it off her mind. She could not help remembering that Tex had first come to the ranch in Bud's truck. Tex claimed he was going to prospect this winter, but who could prospect in the snow? Jo had half a notion to read that letter. A flush crept into her cheeks. No, she couldn't do that. Must be the change in the weather made her so uneasy. There was storm in the peaks. And she was constantly worried about Dan.

Pa said, "Time our cattle was in off the range—what there is of 'em. I've seen the day when roundup on this ranch was big doin's—fat cattle everywhere, bunkhouse full of waddies. Now—" He gestured bitterly. "Jo, you better take Tex and—"

"Tex needn't bother," Jo said. She suddenly wanted to be away from Tex—to be alone and think.

But Tex said, "No bother at all. I'll shore help you drive 'em in!"

BUNDLED against the cold, Jo rode in silence, the sting of the wind on her cheeks and taste of snow on her lips. Her horse spooked at everything—skunk cabbage in the frozen meadow that crackled like dry cornstalks, a burned stump and a waving, willow branch. Jo could not blame him. She too felt the utter loneliness of the woods, silent of birds, bleak without sun. She shivered at the jibberish of coyotes borne on the wind.

"Yep," Tex said, "everything's a-gittin' ready for the winter." His voice was the only warm thing in that landscape. Jo found herself reaching toward it. The horse hung back till he rubbed shoulders with the other horse; then he went along all right. Jo was glad now Tex had come. With him beside her, his familiar Stetson outlined against the dark balsams, the smoke from his cigarette blowing now and then in her face, she was all right.

They did not find the cattle where they expected and pushed on. Snow bearded the horses, muffled everything in white. The day was darkening to a close when they came upon a little bunch of cattle and started them moving.

"I'm so c-cold," mumbled Jo.

Tex made a fire of dry spruce twigs, and they stopped to warm. The horses humped against the storm, and the girl and the man huddled from the wind. It seemed the most natural thing in the world for Tex to put a sheltering arm about Jo. There were just the two of them on all this bleak mountain, with snow hissing against the rocks and wind sweeping through the forest with a wild ocean roar. And it was natural, too, for him to kiss her. Her hat rolled into the snow, and for a moment her cheek rested against his and his hat sheltered the two of them.

"Jo—Jo" he whispered.

"We better get the cattle home, Tex—" How had she ever not trusted him?

Dan was home when they got in, and he was happy because he'd got a raise.

"That old skinflint MacIntyre musta seen the light," remarked Pa. "Fust time I ever know him to pay a decent wage."

Jo saw Dan fidget. Something told her Dan had not got that money from Mac.

The last time she'd gone to town to buy grub the storekeeper had told her, "Yep, they say there's a reg'lar gang killin' elk hereabouts and truckin' the meat out at night. Cain't blame the city folks fer buyin' it—other meat's so turrible high. But the authorities is crackin' down. Them hunters 'll end up behind bars." He squinted at Jo. "What's your brother doin' these days?"

"He's working for MacIntyre," she murmured and hurried away. The storekeeper thought Dan was killing elk. And Jo was sure he was! Dan an expert hunter, a dead shot, and he wanted money desperately to go to college.

HEAVY of heart, Jo trailed him next morning, and he did not go to Old MacIntyre's. His tracks in the fresh snow were plain, circling back over the ridge in the direction of Ruck Helstern's. Jo had suspected Ruck of killing elk for market.

That night Jo confronted Dan. "You're working for Ruck."

Dan was sulky. "What if I am?"

"Oh, Dan, you must quit before it's too late!"

"I ain't quittin'!" he said stubbornly. "And you keep your lip buttoned, sis."

Jo did not dare tell Pa. Just to have Dan working for Ruck, a sheep man, would be bad enough. Pa cursed everything that had to do with sheep. He spat after Ruck's trucks that rumbled by several times a day loaded with woollies. If Pa knew Dan was killing elk he'd be crazy mad. No telling what he'd do. But Dan must not continue at this game or he would end up in jail.

It was snowing again next morning. Dan was up and gone before breakfast. Pa's six-shooter was gone, too—and a person did not hunt elk with a six-shooter! Jo was scared. She had no one to turn to except Tex. After breakfast she followed him out to the barn so she could talk without Pa hearing. But Tex was not at the barn. She heard hoofbeats muted in the snow. Tex had saddled his horse in a mighty big hurry and gone. Where?

He hadn't even done the accustomed chores. Frowning, Jo went into the barn to fork down some hay for the stock, but started back from something big and black in one corner. A bear—no, just a bundle of hides.

She went over and kicked at the bundle and saw they were elk hides. Dan must have left them here. With a boy's thoughtlessness he had brought them home from Ruck's figuring maybe to tan them and make chaps and things. If Bud Thorne found these here. . . . Frantically Jo tried to think of some way to get rid of them. They were too green to burn, too big to hide under the hay. The ground was frozen too hard to bury them. Tex must have seen them. Why hadn't he come and told her or carried them out somewhere? They were too heavy for her, all frozen together. With the axe she tried to chop them apart. Then she ran to the house for a kettle of boiling water.

"What in tunket's the matter, Jo?" came Pa's fretful voice. "What you goin' to do with that there—"

Jo hadn't time to talk. She flew back to the barn and those darned skins. The hot water thawed them all right, but they were wired together too, and she couldn't find the wire clippers. At last she got the hides apart. Now to carry them to that beaver hole. Careful not to make telltale tracks. Go through the trampled corral and along the fence . . . Hurry, hurry before someone comes along the road. . . .

SHE MADE one successful trip and was halfway across the corral with the last of the hides when she heard a car. She dropped the hides and pretended to be fooling with the horses, but it was no use. The car stopped, and she saw it was a green truck—Bud Thorne's truck. Bud got out. He moved quickly upon Jo, who had no chance even to kick the hides under the fence.

"State game inspection," he recited smugly. "I'll have to see what you've got there."

Jo stood numb. She had been working so hard the blood roared in her ears.

"Who killed these elk?" Bud demanded.

Jo stared at him.

"I ain't got all day," snapped Bud. "What you got to say?"

"I hate you!"

The grin never completely left Bud's frost-reddened face though his eyes were intent as a weasel's. "Too bad," he sneered. "It could have been different. If you'd played along with me—" He dumped the hides in his truck and striding to the cabin kicked open the door. But he jerked back with an oath for there stood Pa, shotgun pointed at his middle.

"Blast ye," said Pa. "Bustin' in on decent folks. Speak up quick afore I let you have it!"

Bud yelled, "You speak up, damn you! Explain that bundle of fresh elk hides if you can!"

"Elk hides?"

Jo was afraid Pa would bust a blood vessel. His gaunt face purpled, but his voice came thin as a knife blade, "They ain't ourn."

"Dan killed 'em, didn't he?"

Pa steadied his gun against the door frame. "Git afore I fill you full of lead!"

"I'll git the boy!" snarled Bud as he backed off toward his truck.

When he had gone Pa sagged into his chair. "If Dan did it," he sobbed, "I'll skin him alive. I'll—"

Jo raced for her horse. She had to find her brother before Bud Thorne did. A tall loose-knit figure stepped out from behind the barn. "Tex!" Jo cried, too hurried to wonder where he had been. "Oh, Tex, help me find Dan!"

"I'll find him, you bet. But you stay here."

"No, I'll—"

Tex grabbed her as she put a foot in the stirrup. "Got no time to argue," he growled, and carried her kicking and fighting to the granary, dumped her in and slid the wooden bolt that had been put on the outside to keep the horses from getting into the grain.

ANGRY and scared, Jo beat on the door. Suddenly she knew the truth. Tex was a stool pigeon for Bud Thorne! That's why, when he'd discovered those hides, he'd galloped off to phone for Bud from a neighbor's down the road. That's why Bud had got here so soon. It wouldn't take him fifteen minutes from town. Tex, the lowdown sneak! If he'd been honorable he'd not have stood by and let Bud bully her and Pa the way he had. He must have enjoyed winning Dan's confidence just so he could send him to jail now! And he'd no doubt found Jo very simple and amusing.

Though Jo hollered and pounded, Pa either did not hear her or he could not drag himself this far with his bad back. The granary had no window. She felt around in the dark, found some bailing wire. She pushed this through the door crack, worked and worked to loosen the wooden slide and wept because it took so much time and meanwhile Dan—Dan—

After what seemed hours she got the door open. She couldn't find her horse so she ran stumbling through the snow toward Ruck's. Ruck hated all law. He'd protect Dan and put a bullet through Tex.

When she was still a good half-mile from the ranch, she heard a truck churning through the wet and thinking maybe Ruck was on it she ran in that direction. The truck loomed blackly in the storm and lurched past, and her cry was swallowed up in the slap-slap of chains. But now she saw the orange light of a fire through the snow and beyond it the outline of a shed. Standing by the fire were two men. One of them was saying:

"This is the last load. We'll have to lay off now. Them damn government snoopers —" That was Ruck Helstern, no mistake. Not waiting to see who the other man was, Jo burst upon them.

"Ruck! They're after Dan! Don't let them get him!"

Ruck's gun leaped to his hand, but slid back into its holster as its owner's piggish eyes recognized the girl.

"Whew, gal, you don't want to startle a man like that!"

Jo panted, "Tex Parker's in cahoots with Bud Thorne and they're both after Dan—and you, I reckon."

"Huh?" Ruck's huge paw whirled the other man around—and it was Bud Thorne!

Jo gasped.

Ruck roared at Bud, "You in cahoots with that Texan?"

"You know better'n that, Ruck," whined Bud. "You know I've stuck by my agreement to shut my eyes to what you was doin' if you'd fork over—"

"Damn your mealy mouth! Dunno why I ever had dealin's with you. What about this Tex?"

"He's no friend o' mine. The Denver office musta got wise to what was goin' on here and sent him in to git me. But he won't!" Bud squirmed out of Ruck's grasp. "I'll git him first."

Jo felt suddenly sick. Bud Thorne violating the game laws he was hired to enforce! Everything was all confused except Bud's last words—"I'll git him first!" She started to back away.

"No you don't," Ruck growled. "Not till we find Dan. He's hidin' out on us. Reckon he got wise we were goin' to make him the goat. Only reason I hired him was to keep an eye on him, and now he's give us the slip. But we'll find him, and when we do—"

"We're wastin' time!" snapped Bud. "Gal, you know too damn much." Clubbing his gun, he swung at her.

Jo stood frozen. She saw the evil gleam in Bud's eyes, saw the snow falling. She heard a thud and then a shot, but strangely felt no pain. Bud's knees seemed to crumple and he sprawled in the snow, and a long lean figure stood over him.

BUCK was dancing about with a shattered wrist and above his cussing Dan's voice shrilled, "Shoot my pardner in the back, will you!"

That was the last Jo remembered. Quietly she slid down into the soft snow. . . .

"Jo, Jo darlin'—" Tex's voice sounded a long way off. The girl shivered and opened her eyes. She was crumpled by the fire on Tex's coat, and Tex and Dan were hovering over her. "Thank God, you're all right," husked Tex. "Everything's all right. We got Ruck and Bud cinched up and in Bud's truck a-waitin' to go to jail. And I've had men posted in town a long time to take care of them truckers. They'll shore be law abidin' hombres from now on."

"Gosh, sis," snorted Dan. "You'd oughta knowed better'n to come up here. Me and Tex has been waitin' all fall to nab Bud Thorne. We coulda caught Ruck any time, but Bud, he was cagey."

"You and Tex," croaked Jo, sitting up groggily. "But I thought—those hides—"

"Oh them," Dan said. "Ruck's truckers planted them there. That's how Tex and me knowed the gang was gittin' ready to crawl out from under and shift the blame to us. Everything was jest right—even snow to cover their tracks."

"B-but," babbled Jo, "you've been sh-shooting elk too."

"Naw. I been tendin' sheep. That meat I brought in was mutton. You know how Pa is. I didn't dare tell him. I let him think I was workin' for Mac."

"I expect Pa knew more than he let on," said Jo, as Tex lifted her to her feet. "But I don't see how Tex—"

"Dan writ the Governor things needed lookin' into hereabouts. Jest happened I was visitin' the Governor—his folks and mine come from the same parts—and he sent me up here."

"Why didn't you tell me?" cried Jo.

"I thought I was savin' you worry," said Tex humbly. "Can you forgive me for lockin' you in the shed? I was afeard you'd git hurt up here."

"Come on," urged Dan. "It's cold and we got prisoners."

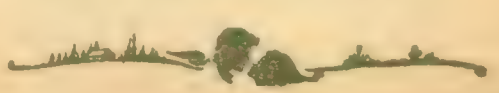
"I ain't built fer this kind o' business," Tex was earnestly declaring. "I'm a cow man and I got a hankerin' to settle down. Jo, oh Jo—this is a heck of a time to ask—but will you marry me? I've loved you so long!"

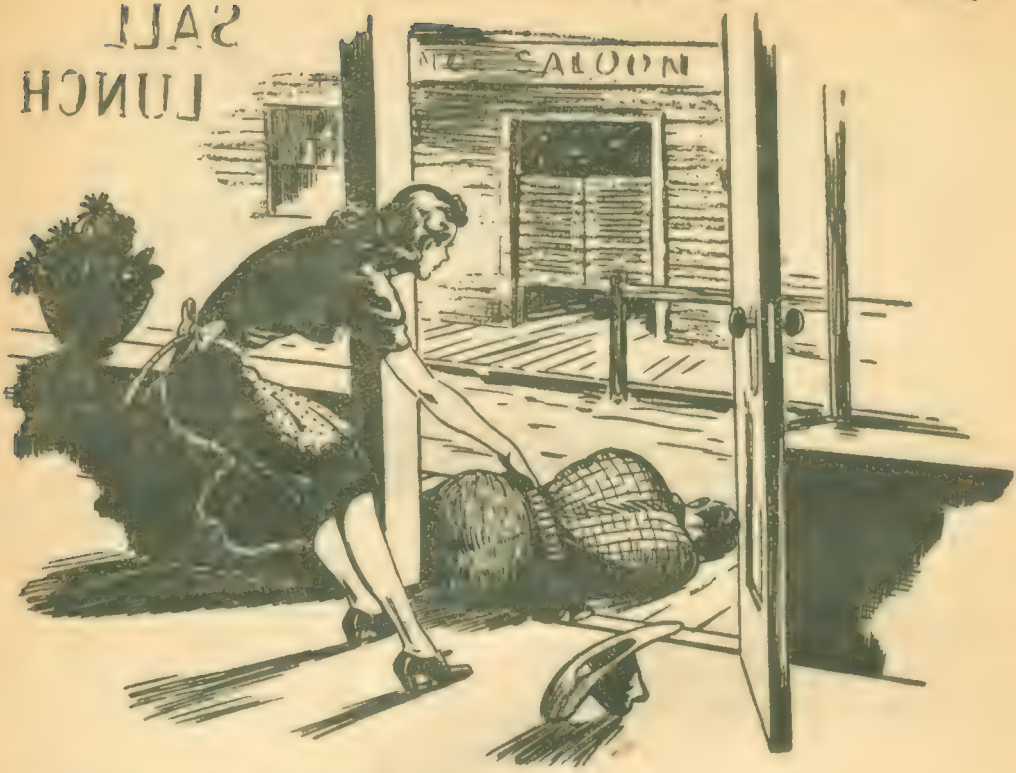
"I love you too, Tex!" Jo lifted her lips to his.

"Come on," Dan fidgeted. "I gotta git home and tell Pa. Hey—"

Neither Jo nor Tex heard him. Tex had Jo in his arms, and he was kissing her over and over.

"Aw, for Pete's sake!" said Dan.





Sally dragged him into the café

There's Always Another Chance

By Elmer Kelton

McLANE wouldn't be safe until he got out of gun range from the past

SOMETHING about the tall stranger's appearance attracted the old sheriff's attention immediately. The man came riding in through the thick, mesquite-choked draw on the south side of town and trotted slowly up the dusty main street of Greasewood.

The sheriff moved casually to the edge of the springy wooden sidewalk to have a good look at the stranger as he rode past. Both horse and man were covered with dust, and the stranger had a two- or three-week beard. But his pistol was shining, and his holster was freshly cleaned.

Probably harmless, the lawman told himself, but since the bank was robbed last year, I'm not takin' any chances with suspicious-lookin' strangers.

The tall man looked searchingly at the signs in front of all the buildings on the street, and he slowed his horse down to a walk as he passed one of the saloons. The lawman knew what the sign said: *Rainbow Saloon, Adam Norse, Proprietor.*

He had been on his way to that rowdy place when he saw the stranger. He was going to tell Norse again that there had been many complaints about the gamblers he kept in the saloon. But he already knew what Norse would say, the same thing he

had said a dozen times before: "Let the men who gamble with them watch out for themselves."

The sheriff wanted also to tell him to stop pestering Sally Neal, for he knew she resented Norse's attentions. But maybe that wasn't an old lawman's business.

The stranger spurred his horse back into a trot and headed for the livery stable at the end of the street. The sheriff watched him for a moment, then leisurely sauntered after him. At the end of the plank sidewalk he stooped over and picked up a short piece of soft wood, leaned against the wall, and began to whittle. He paused and pushed back his hat for coolness. A lock of grey fell over his wrinkled forehead, and he stuck out an angular chin as he tried to blow the hair back out of the way.

After a few minutes the stranger came out of the stable afoot. He paused a moment, looking up the street, then strode toward the sidewalk.

Now the sheriff had a good chance to look at him. Tall and somewhat lanky, the stranger walked with a slight limp. As he went by, the sheriff could see a thin streak on his chin where the whiskers did not grow. That meant a small scar of some kind. The combination seemed a little familiar, the lawman thought. He had probably seen it on some dodger that had come into his office from another town.

The stranger went into Jake's Barber Shop. The sheriff strolled by and heard Jake telling him where the bathtub was. Then the lawman crossed the street and walked down to his own office.

He took out all the WANTED notices from a drawer in his desk and slowly thumbed through them, looking for one that fitted the stranger's description. At last he paused, stared at one for a moment, then pulled it out of the stack and began to read it at length. Two years old, it was from the sheriff's office in Franklin, Texas.

> WANTED: Pete McLane, in connection with the death of Cory Nestor, in Franklin, Texas, August 24, 1893. McLane is six feet, three inches tall, with dark-brown hair, blue eyes almost grey, walks with a limp, and has a scar on the left side of his chin. He is 29 years old. Served five years in the state penitentiary for cattle theft. No reward.

The sheriff looked at the notice for quite a while.

"Might bear a little watchin'," he said to himself, "but Franklin's too far away for me to worry about. There isn't any reward, so it must not've been cold-blooded murder."

At last he slipped the dodger back into the desk drawer, put on his hat, and stepped out to the sidewalk. He looked down the street and saw the stranger, now clean-shaven, coming out of the barber shop. The man moved briskly enough, except for his slight limp. He paused for a moment outside Norse's saloon, gave his gunbelt a slight tug, then moved through the batwing doors.

The lawman stepped down off the board sidewalk and angled across the dusty street toward the saloon. He paused at the doors. Usually there was at least a little noise in the saloon, even in the middle of the day, but now there was not even the jingle of a spur. The sheriff pushed through the doors and stopped. Nothing was out of place, but there was a tension in the room, something ominous that he felt immediately.

A tall mirror beside the door threw a dull, shimmering reflection on the ceiling. Two card games had been in progress, but the players had stopped and were looking intently toward the bar, where the stranger stood fingering a full whiskey glass and glaring at Norse. Norse's pudgy face, usually red, was now pale, and his eyes were opened wide.

The stranger gave the sheriff a swift glance and looked back at Norse. Then he downed the drink and swung away from the bar, but the lawman knew he was watching Norse through the mirror as he stalked out.

Norse stared after him until the sound of his footsteps had faded away. Then he nervously poured himself a drink and took it all in one gulp.

"What's the trouble, Norse?" the sheriff asked.

"Nothin', sheriff," the saloonman an-

swered weakly. "Nothin'." He clunked the whiskey glass down top of the bar and quickly pulled off his apron.

"Speedy!" he called urgently. "Speedy!"

A fat little man stepped out of the tiny kitchen.

"Take over the bar, Speedy," Norse ordered. "I'm goin' home for awhile."

He walked swiftly out the back door.

Trying to hide his confusion, the sheriff looked about. The gamblers had started their games again, and the little bartender was wiping the bar. The lawman walked back out to the street. He nodded to a cowboy and asked, "Have you seen a tall stranger around here in the last few minutes?"

"Yep. He went into Sally's café."

"Thanks." The sheriff strode down the street to the little restaurant. A tiny bell jingled as he opened the door. He saw the stranger at a table on the far side of the room, sitting with his back to the wall. Sally Neal stepped out of the kitchen.

"Come in, Uncle John. What'll it be?"

He grinned at the pretty blond girl who stood smiling at him. "Just a cup of coffee, Sally."

She went back into the kitchen. The sheriff moved over to the stranger's table.

"Mind if I sit down?" he asked pleasantly.

The stranger eyed him suspiciously. "Have a seat."

"Thanks." The sheriff pulled up a chair and settled down comfortably. "I'm John Cole, county sheriff. Everybody just calls me Uncle John."

The stranger was silent. The sheriff's smile faded.

"I saw what happened in Norse's place while ago. I'd like to know what it's all about."

The stranger looked at him blankly, but said nothing. Sally brought two steaming cups of coffee and set them down in front of the men.

"It took me fifteen years to make a peaceful town of Greasewood," Sheriff Cole continued, "and I'd like to keep it that way."

"So?" The stranger began to stir his coffee.

The lawman leaned forward and said forcefully, "So, I know who you are, Pete McLane!"

The stranger dropped his spoon. It struck against the side of the cup and rang a moment. Then he picked it up and nervously began once more to stir his coffee.

"I guess now you'll be wantin' to put me in your jail," he said resignedly.

"No," Cole replied, "not so long as you don't raise a ruckus. Just what was the trouble between you and Norse?"

McLane hesitated a moment. Then his reserve seemed suddenly to break. "It's a long story, sheriff."

He took a big swallow of the black coffee and set the cup down. "You see, Norse's real name is Nestor. He and his brother, Cory, used to own a big ranch down close to Franklin. I had a little place too, and one side of it adjoined their outfit. We were always havin' trouble with one another, because they used to run off my stock at night. One day they caught me over on their range tryin' to find some of my lost cattle. That's where I got this limp and scar. They gunned me down and left me for dead.

"I was married then." McLane stared blankly at his cup and absent-mindedly turned it around and around. "Jeanie was worried when I didn't come home that night, and when my horse came back the next mornin' without me, she back-trailed him and found me almost dead. Somehow she got me onto him and took me home.

"The Nestor boys found out I wasn't dead, so they decided to get rid of me another way. They ran a bunch of their cattle onto my place and penned them in a wire corral I had built for wild stock I drug out of the brush. Then they went to town and reported that some of their cattle were stolen. Naturally they didn't have any trouble findin' them on my place, and they charged me with rustling.

"I had lots of friends around Franklin, and most of them didn't believe I was guilty. But the Nestors had friends too, and I had to be tried. The jury was doubtful, but the evidence was too strong. They gave me the lightest sentence they could get by with.

"I spent five years in the pen, sheriff,

five years on a framed-up charge. Jeanie almost went to pieces at first, but she tried to keep the ranch up by herself. It finally killed her."

McLane's hand trembled. He stopped talking and drank the rest of his coffee. The sheriff tugged at his moustache and looked uncomfortably down at the floor.

"The friendly neighbors helped her all they could," McLane continued, "but there was still too much for a girl like her to do. She was just wearing herself down. Then one day she got caught out in the rain and went down with pneumonia. She lived only a few days."

McLane clenched his fist. "It wouldn't have happened if I'd been there. It was the Nestor brothers' fault. They killed my wife just as surely as if they had shot her. I swore right then that when I got out I would kill them both, even if I had to hang for it.

"When I finished my sentence I went back to Franklin. I found Cory in a saloon that he and Adam had bought, and I made him shoot it out with me. It was a fair fight, but he had some good-for-nothin' friends who claimed it was murder, so I had to leave town quick. Adam disappeared as soon as he heard about it. Now, after two years, I've caught up with him."

McLane looked straight into the lawman's eyes. "I hate to disturb the peace and quiet of your town, sheriff, but I'm gonna kill him!"

He stopped talking then, for he noticed Sally standing beside the table, staring wide-eyed at him.

"Here is the dinner you ordered," she said softly, placing a large plate of food in front of McLane. "I'll bring you both some more coffee."

McLane stared after her. "I hadn't noticed it before, sheriff, but she looks a lot like Jeanie. Who is she?"

"Her name is Sally Neal. Her dad used to be a deputy of mine. He died a couple of years ago, and Sally bought this café with the money he left her. She's a fine girl, and a wonderful cook."

McLane said nothing more. He started eating. Sally brought more coffee, and the sheriff began to stir his slowly.

"Why didn't you kill Norse in the saloon while ago?" he asked. "You had a perfect chance."

"He didn't have a gun. Besides, I want to give him time to sweat. I want him to know I'm after him and that I'm gonna kill him. I want to make him suffer, like *she* must have."

Cole carefully sipped his hot coffee. "It's not that I mind you shootin' Norse, or Nestor," he said. "Lord knows he deserves it about as much as anybody I know. But he's got a lot of two-bit friends who would call it murder. And your record from Franklin would catch up with you. I'd have to send you back there. And somewhere down the line somebody would surely kill you, even if you didn't hang.

"You seem like a nice fellow, McLane. Why don't you just move on someplace far away, where nobody knows you, and forget about all this? There's always another chance for a young man like you. But if you kill Norse you'll never get that chance!"

"I've known that from the day I started out, two years ago," McLane replied bitterly. "And I'm not quittin' now."

Sheriff Cole silently drank his coffee, as McLane finished his meal. Then he arose, put on his hat, and said grimly, "All right. McLane, but when it happens, I'll be comin' after you!"

Fifty yards down the street he was stopped in his tracks by the deafening roar of a gunshot behind him. He whirled around and saw McLane slump down in the doorway of the café. A thin column of gunsmoke curled up from behind a building a few doors down the street. Sally suddenly appeared in the doorway and started dragging McLane back inside.

"Take care of him, Sally!" Cole shouted, and he ran to the alley after the ambusher. He caught a glimpse of someone dashing in the back door of Norse's saloon.

He trotted down the alley and threw open the saloon door. Everything seemed normal. Norse and Speedy were both behind the bar. Two of Norse's gamblers were seated at separate tables conducting games with the usual crowd which could always be found in Norse's during the daytime.

"Which one of you just came in here?" the sheriff demanded.

Norse stepped out from behind the bar. "I'm afraid you've made a mistake, sheriff," he said, almost insolently. "They've all been in here for hours."

Cole noted that Norse was not wearing a gun. If he had fired the shot at McLane he had quickly hidden the pistol so it could not be checked.

"I thought you were goin' home while ago," Cole said, eyeing Norse coolly.

"I came back. Ask any of the boys."

Cole nodded disgustedly and walked out. He knew they would all say the same thing. At the café he found the doctor examining McLane, who was lying on the floor. Sally knelt beside him, her face pale and tears glistening in her pretty blue eyes.

"You're lucky, fellow," the doctor was saying. "If you hadn't heard the gun click and started to duck, he'd have gotten you in the heart instead of in the left shoulder."

McLane's face was pale from shock, and the skin was drawn tight with anger. "I ought to've known he'd pull something like that. I should've killed him while I had the chance."

"Don't talk like that," Sally was saying softly. "You'll be all right. Uncle John will take care of him."

The sheriff looked regretfully down at McLane. "We'll take you over to my house till you get well," he said. "There isn't a decent hotel in town."

McLane started to protest, but didn't.

"I'll bring you your meals," Sally said. "Uncle John can't even boil water without scorching it. That's why he always eats at my place." She winked mischievously at the sheriff.

The doctor wrapped his roll of gauze. "You'll be ready to ride in two or three weeks," he announced.

The sheriff borrowed a buckboard and carried McLane to his house on the edge of town. "Got to keep you off your feet so you'll be able to get up and ride out of here as soon as possible," he said meaningly. McLane made no reply.

Late that afternoon Sheriff Cole went into his office and took out the dodger about McLane. He looked it over for a few minutes and then began to write a letter. When it was finished he took it to the post office and handed it to the postmaster.

"I want that to get out as quickly as possible," he said. "It's important."

The sheriff kept a close watch on Norse, for he was afraid the man would try to finish the job he had already bungled once. But Norse stayed close to the saloon and the ill-kept shack he called home.

The days slowly went by. McLane began to walk around the house a little, although the doctor had told him to stay off his feet. Every night he would pull the shade down and move the bed to a new position so Norse could not shoot him as he slept.

Three times a day Sally carried food to McLane. She always refused to let the sheriff take it for her. "You'd steal the dessert and drink up half the coffee," she chided him jokingly.

One day Sheriff Cole met her carrying McLane his dinner. "What you got in that basket?" he grinned.

"Sowbelly and beans," she joked, trying to keep the basket out of his reach. But he caught it and lifted the cloth cover she had spread over the food.

He whistled mirthfully. "A whole pie! You never do that for any of your regular customers, not even your Uncle John. Reckon that's a good thing to be takin' a sick man?"

Sally blushed and tried vainly to make some sort of reply. The sheriff tucked the cloth back over the food and smiled.

"Just be careful that when he leaves here he doesn't take you with him."

Sally turned quickly and began walking again toward the house. But Cole noticed a new spring in her step, something he hadn't seen since her father had died. He chuckled to himself as he started back to his office.

A few days later as he sat leaned back from his desk reading some new dodgers, a shadow fell across the room. He looked up and saw Sally's slender figure silhouetted in the door.

"Come in, Sally. What's the trouble?"

"No trouble, Uncle John," she replied smiling. "I just want you to get Judge Winters to draw up some legal papers for me."

"Legal papers? What on earth for?"

"I'm selling the café to Widow Watkins. She's been wanting to buy it for a long time."

The sheriff started to protest, but Sally held up her hand.

"And I want to get a marriage license."

The sheriff dropped the dodger back onto his desk and let the front legs of his chair hit the floor with a bang.

"You mean you and McLane. . . ."

Sally nodded. Then she threw her arms around his neck and said, half-laughing, half-crying, "Oh, Uncle John, I've talked him out of shooting Norse. As soon as he is ready to ride we are going to go away someplace where he has never been heard of, like Arizona, and start all over again.

"After—after his wife died he had a friend sell his ranch for him. He still has most of the money. We'll buy a new place, and someday I'll make him forget."

Proudly the sheriff took hold of her hand and squeezed it. "Sure you will. But what's Norse gonna say? He's sort of had his eye on you, you know."

"I don't care what he says, so long as he leaves us alone," she answered contemptuously. "I've never liked him."

"Everything will be all right," Sheriff Cole said optimistically. "I'll take care of the papers. You'd better get back over to the café and fix supper for your star customers."

She kissed him lightly on the cheek and went out. The sheriff stared after her, but his smile faded, and a deep frown took its place.

The next day, shortly after the stage had come and gone, Cole walked over to the post office to get his mail.

"Just one letter for you today, Uncle John," the postmaster said. "Postmark says Franklin."

The sheriff thanked him and started toward the house to see McLane. He tore the envelope open and read the letter as he walked. Then he folded it and put it in his vest pocket.

As he neared the house he could hear an argument inside. He recognized Sally's voice. Then McLane angrily strode out and slammed the door behind him. His left arm was in a sling. He was wearing his gun, and his face was flushed with rage.

"Hey, McLane," the sheriff protested, jumping in front of him, "you ought to stay inside. Where are you goin'?"

"I'm goin' to kill a skunk!" McLane thundered, shoving the lawman aside.

Cole heard Sally's voice behind him and turned as she desperately grasped his arm.

"Uncle John," she pleaded, "stop him! He's going to fight Norse!"

The sheriff put his arm around her shoulder comfortingly. "The only way I could stop him now would be to shoot him. What happened?"

"Norse stopped me as I was bringing dinner to Pete," she sobbed. "He twisted my arm and threatened me. He said if I didn't stay away from Pete he would kill him. When I got here Pete could see that something was wrong, and he made me tell him. Oh, Uncle John, Norse will know he's coming. He won't give Pete a chance. Please stop them."

"I can't stop the fight now," the sheriff told her, "but maybe I can make sure it's a fair one. You'd better stay here."

He turned and ran back to the main street. Then he went into an alley and trotted down it until he was almost at the back door of Norse's saloon. The door suddenly flew open and a flood of men began to spill out. Apparently Norse was getting ready for the fight, and these men wanted no part of it. As the last man came out the door the sheriff drew his gun and silently stepped inside.

Quickly he scanned the room. Only three men were left, Norse and his two ace gamblers. Their attention was on the front door, and they had failed to notice the sheriff's entrance. Norse was holding a sawed-off shotgun behind the bar, out of sight. The gamblers were seated on either side of the room, each holding a pistol under the table, trained on the door.

"All right, you two," the sheriff barked, "pitch those pistols out to the middle of the floor!"

The three men jumped, startled by the lawman's voice. The gamblers hesitated a moment. Then one of them pitched his gun out on the floor. It landed with a thud.

The other glared at him, then threw away his own.

"That's better. Now both of you put your hands on the tables, where they can be seen." The two complied.

Norse was still standing behind the bar, holding the shotgun, but the sheriff's unexpected appearance had shocked him so that he did not move.

"You, Norse," the sheriff ordered, "put that shotgun up on top of the bar where everybody can see it."

Norse set the shotgun down, muzzle pointed toward the door. Footsteps thumped on the walk outside. Then the swinging doors parted and McLane stepped in, his right hand poised over his gun. His gaze quickly swept the room—over Norse and his shotgun, the two gamblers, the guns on the floor, and the sheriff, standing at the rear wall.

Then his eyes flashed back to Norse. "I see you've got your shotgun cocked and ready. You killed my wife, Norse, and now you're threatening Sally. But you'll never hurt anybody again. Reach for that gun!"

Norse didn't move.

"All right, then," McLane said angrily. "The sheriff is gonna start countin', and when he says 'three,' I'm reachin' for my gun. You'd better do the same. Start countin', sheriff."

"Not me, McLane. I'm just a bystander."

McLane nodded impatiently at one of the gamblers and ordered, "You! Start countin'!"

"One."

The gambler paused and caught a deep breath.

"Two."

Norse's hands trembled and almost started to reach for the shotgun.

"Three!" Both gamblers dived under their tables, and the sheriff dropped to the floor. McLane's pistol seemed to leap from its holster as Norse grabbed the shotgun off the bar. McLane's gun barked once and the shotgun exploded harmlessly in the air, blowing a jagged hole in the ceiling. Norse dropped the gun and clutched at his chest, then slumped forward onto the bar and slowly slid to the floor.

"All right, McLane," the sheriff ordered gruffly, "get back to the house, quick. I'll be there in a minute."

McLane limped out the door. The sheriff strode across the room and picked up the gamblers' pistols. Swiftly he unloaded them and pitched them behind the bar.

"Don't you fellers get any smart ideas about shootin' people in the back," he warned. Then he backed out the door and ran to the house.

There he found McLane holding Sally tightly to him with his good arm. She was crying softly.

"We haven't got much time," Cole said anxiously. "Sally, have you had the papers signed by Widow Watkins and gotten your money yet?"

"Yes," she answered, wiping the tears from her eyes. "It's in the bank."

"Well, run up there and draw out all your money, quick. I'll get the justice of the peace to come over here and read the marriage ceremony, and I'll get a buckboard for you two to leave in."

"But what's the hurry?" McLane protested.

"Norse has a lot of good-for-nothin' friends who'll be after your scalp if you stay here long."

"I'm not afraid of them," McLane argued.

"That's just it. You'd stay around here and fight them till they finally killed you. Maybe you'd get a few of them, but they'd kill you sooner or later. You've got to get out of here, son, while you still can."

"I won't run away," said McLane stubbornly. "No cheap bunch of gamblers can make me."

Uncle John Cole was silent for a moment. "McLane," he said finally, "You've got to leave—for my sake. Somebody here is bound to know that Franklin incident. They could charge me with neglecting my duty. And if the sheriff there is notified he'll force me to arrest you. Then where would Sally be?"

"I guess you're right," McLane agreed after a pause. "When do we start?"

While Sally withdrew her money from the bank and hurriedly packed her things the sheriff went to the livery stable and bought a buckboard for the couple. He

knew that the constant jar of riding a horse would be hard on McLane's unhealed wound. The marriage ceremony was held in the sheriff's house. Then everybody helped load the buckboard, and Cole tied McLane's horse on behind as the couple climbed up.

McLane shook the old man's hand.

"Thanks for your help, sheriff. We'll be across the line into New Mexico by this time tomorrow. Then you can send out the alarm for me."

There were tiny turkey-track wrinkles beside the sheriff's grey eyes as he grinned. "And thank *you* for ridding me of Norse's crooked place."

Sally leaned over and kissed him. "Good-by, Uncle John. Thanks for everything."

McLane picked up the reins.

"That's a good team you've got there," the lawman said meaningly. "You can drive them easy with one hand. And they can take you a long ways before dark. See that they do it."

McLane flipped the reins and the team trotted away. Sally turned and waved back until the buckboard went around a curve and was lost to sight in the thick mesquite.

"Fine looking couple," the justice of the peace said. "But we'll miss Sally. I'll bet the widow Watkins can't cook pie like she can." He shook his head sadly as he walked away.

The sheriff stood gazing at the road as he took from his pocket the letter he had received earlier in the day. He unfolded it and read it again.

> Dear Sheriff Cole:
>
> In reply to your letter of August 3, it has been proved to the law's satisfaction that the fight in which Pete McLane killed Cory Nestor was a fair one, and that his motives were justifiable. I inform you with pleasure, therefore, that all charges against McLane have been dropped.
>
> Respectfully yours,
> Andrew H. Todd,
> Sheriff of Franklin County.

Sheriff John Cole smiled as he ripped the letter to bits and let them flutter to the ground. There wasn't another chance for him here, he thought. Then he turned and walked slowly back toward town, whistling as he went.

There's an extra issue of Ranch Romances this month

Don't miss

THE THIRD APRIL NUMBER

KNOW YOUR WEST

Answers to the questions on page 41

1. One. That is, one single rope.

2. Cattle were wilder in the days before barbed wire, and big brands were easier to read on a running animal or at a distance. Since the branded part of a cowhide is practically useless for leather and big brands are no longer needed, most cattle owners now use a smaller iron.

3. Artesian wells.

4. Quaking aspen trees, also called "quakin' asps."

5. Cantle.

6. Long Tom.

7. That he had a steer roped, with the "horne" end of his rope tied hard and fast to the saddle horn.

8. Uncomplimentary, since "long rider" was another term for an outlaw—because most outlaws had to make long rides to escape the law.

9. Leopards or leopard horses.

10. Idaho.

Trailing Horse Herds

By J. Frank Dobie

Plenty of horses were herded north in trail-driving days

HORSES, trailers always said, are worse in stampedes than cattle. Being more nervous and more intelligent, they become more panic-stricken in a run. And here are stories to prove it.

It was on Bear Creek in the Indian Territory (now Oklahoma) that one of the worst horse stampedes took place. It was told to me by the late Dan Murrah of Del Rio, Texas. "There were 400 or 500 head in the herd," he said. "I was in the lead, and we were going down a wooded slope. When we got close to some big trees, I noticed the remains of a recently abandoned camp. I guess the camp had been made by hunters, for I saw a big old bear's paw on the ground. And everybody knows that any horse is afraid of a bear. My horse shied, and I went on. The next thing I knew the herd behind me was screaming and bawling and tearing back up the hill. The leaders of the herd had smelt that bear's paw, and as quick as electricity they had put the whole herd into stampede.

"The ground shook. I never heard such screaming among horses in all my life. Every animal had his mouth open and his tongue out. We struck some deep trails worn down a steep grade. Some horses got down in them. The others went right on over them as if they were a bridge. After we finally got the stampede checked, we found that some of the horses that had been run over could not walk. Their backs were cut and torn by hoofs."

Indians were worse about stampeding horses than they were about stampeding cattle. One night out in West Texas they stampeded a herd that Ed McWhorter was with. (Ed, of George West in Live Oak County, is the only still living horse trailer I know of.) All the saddle horses but two got away. The next morning McWhorter took one horse and a hand took the other, the two going in different directions. McWhorter came on a horse that had evidently been recently shot—the saddle was still on him—a few minutes later saw a man afoot.

(Please turn to page 108)

Storm Over the Cebolletas

By James W. Routh

THE STORY SO FAR:

At the end of a three-year trail, NEIL DIXON finds unexpected complications interfering with his showdown with VIC BRACKNER, the man who murdered his fiancée. Brackner, the owner of the V Slash, has become the most powerful rancher in Tanque Valley and the terrorizer of the homesteaders there.

One girl, UNA CHARLESTON, defies him, and Neil decides to help her with her dream of starting a store at the crossroads, encouraging the growth of a town, and thus wresting Brackner's free range from him.

However, Neil is taken prisoner by Brackner's men, CHIP MORRIS and GIL FOSTER, and kept under guard at the ranch. Neil is sure that Brackner has finally discovered the reason for Neil's enmity toward him.

He sets fire to the V Slash and makes a getaway, aided by ZELDA COOPER, who is in love with him and tries to persuade him to go away with her. However, Neil's determination cannot be shaken to bring final vengeance to Brackner.

CONCLUSION

WITH the first pale thinning of the night's blackness that morning, Neil had gone to the edge of the creek to bathe his injured arm in the ice-cold water. The muscles, which had suffered some further straining in his fight with Ferron, had stiffened up during the night, but the arm no longer throbbed as painfully as it had yesterday, and the soreness was pretty well localized near the shoulder. Massaging it thoroughly, bending wrist and elbow, flexing his fingers, he concluded that while he would have much less than the full use of the arm for several days, nevertheless he would be able to hold a gun and shoot from hip level.

"Neil, that's all I ask," she said

The grey and dismal dawn crawled slowly into the canyon's narrow gash. The rumble of the falls had given him some uneasiness during the night, and now he saw that there was no exit in that direction. Zelda Cooper undoubtedly had been well intentioned, but she did not know about such things. Her perfect hide-out could easily become a death trap. The girl herself, if she came back this morning, might be trailed in. The smoke of a fire was sure to be seen or scented sooner or later. He had no doubt that Brackner, infuriated by the damage done at V Slash, and possibly aware now of who Neil was and why he'd come to Tanque Valley, would leave no stone unturned to run him down and kill him.

"Which is a game that works both ways," he muttered.

He had no intention of playing rabbit to Brackner's wolf. He meant to reverse the rôles. He decided to move out of here without delay, regardless of any understanding Zelda might have that he would wait for her. A thin drizzle of rain was coming down, so before saddling the horse he loosened the rolled slicker from the saddle and pulled it on. It went over him like a tent, which proved that he had made his escape on Ferron's horse. He also had Ferron's gun, the gun he'd taken from the cook's helper, and a belt of ammunition. He would have preferred a rifle to the second six-shooter, but he was better off than he might have been.

Mounting, he followed the creek down the canyon, more or less expecting to meet Zelda on the way. He reached the end of the canyon without encountering anyone, however, and immediately turned back along the ridge, climbing up through the wet brush to its crest, and following that along toward the pines. Before entering the timber, he pulled up on a high point to tighten the saddle and take a look at the country around him. Through gaps in the brush he caught glimpses of the rain-shrouded valley below, and the foothills and mountains swinging in great arcs to the east and west. V Slash, Zelda had told him, was five or six miles southeast of the hide-out; C Bar was about the same distance a little west of south, and the mid-valley river crossing was more than twelve miles south. It afforded him a moment's wry amusement to realize that she had not mentioned the location of Paul Murray's ranch, although she had told him that Murray had gone to bring Una there. And then, as he stepped back into saddle, a sudden twinge of uneasiness stiffened him up and caused him to think back in an effort to recall Zelda's exact words there on the slope of the mountain behind the burning V Slash.

"That was when she told me about Hanlon being wiped out," he remembered. "She brought that in mighty quick. Gave me something else to think about. She's a damned smart girl."

He shook his head, lifted his reins, and then immediately checked the horse. Directly south of him, small with distance and veiled in the drizzling rain and gloom of the early morning, he saw two riders. A moment later, he caught sight of another pair, a little to the east and farther off.

SURE that he would not be detected there against the blackness of the pines, he watched a couple of minutes. The four riders, he decided, were converging on the entrance he had just quitted. He had not moved out too soon. He pulled the horse around and rode on into the timber.

The light rain did not penetrate the pine forest, and the stillness there was vast and brooding, broken only by the eerie sighing of the wind high overhead and the muffled thudding of the horse's hoofs and the faint creaking of saddle leather. He pushed on steadily through the widely spaced trees, working around thickets of underbrush, skirting deep ravines, avoiding outcroppings of rock, following the wide swing of the Cebolletas to the east. He found a trail which showed no signs of recent use, and the horse turned into it willingly. His alertness increased; he watched the trail, scanning carefully the side coverts of the forest, knowing that Brackner would have his men out everywhere. When he came to a cross trail and saw clear hoof prints upon it, he knew that two riders had passed that way

not many minutes ahead of him and were somewhere above him now. It was time to leave the trail.

Again he worked through the trees, going down hill. The timber began to thin out ahead of him. He caught glimpses of the grey sky, and patches of drab range came into view. He pulled rein at the edge of the road, thinking that there was something familiar about this spot. Beyond the road lay one of the valley's wide bays, reaching up to the very edge of the forest. The road made an almost right-angle turn fifty yards east of him, and ran on across the bay, slanting over a brush-covered ridge on the far side of it. As he looked, three riders came over the ridge, loping along the road directly toward him. He turned back into the trees, circled a little and found what he was looking for. This was the trail down which he and Zelda had come last night, almost at the exact spot where they had nearly run into trouble. He pulled in behind what might have been the identical trees that had sheltered them, and sat there listening to the drumming of hoofs.

The riders swept past without pause, following the road to the west. He crossed the trail and made a wide circle through the pines, clinging to the cover they afforded. He came to another trail, pulled up to look and listen, and went across it fast. It was well along toward noon. The clouds hung blackly around the peaks of the mountains, but out across the valley they broke and shifted about, moved by the brisk wind that had not risen again to equal yesterday's gale. He followed the up-grade of the ridge and crossed over it, and sighted V Slash below him. Now descending the slope, he left his horse finally in the timber, and crawled forward to a screen of brush almost directly north of the ranch.

HIS VIEW filled him with grim satisfaction. The blackened uprights of the main building alone were standing; the bunkhouse, the hay barn, most of the other buildings had been burned to the ground. The corrals still stood, of course, and one of the smaller barns, although charred and blackened, had escaped complete destruction. A cook-stove had been set up in the middle of the yard, smoke swirling from a single length of pipe. Various articles of furniture, which had been dragged out of the burning house, were scattered about in the mud and rain. The potbellied cook, with a derby hat on his bald head, was serving up food to four men who apparently had just ridden in for their dinner. One of these men was Ferron. They ate swiftly, mounted and rode away. Another group came in, and the sight of them eating tied Neil's empty stomach into envious knots. He stayed there for a long time, watching the V Slash riders come and go, wondering why Vic Brackner, Foster and Chip Morris did not show up. He had come here for a single purpose—to get on Brackner's trail and keep after the burly murderer until one or both of them died.

Waiting there with stubborn patience, uneasiness built up in him. He kept thinking of Una. He kept remembering how she had defied Vic Brackner, and how Brackner had told her bluntly that he'd have her land one way or another. And a vision came to him of Una as he'd first seen her, standing in the warm sunlight, with the breeze whipping her skirts about her and her dark eyes steadily upon him as she asked if he had any objection to her moving into that empty adobe house by the river crossing.

When at last Brackner, Gil Foster and four other men rode into the yard below him, his relief was unbelievably strong. And then a surge of hate drove everything else out of his consciousness. First things must come first.

While the men down in the ranch yard ate the food served them by the cook in the derby hat, Brackner seemed to be giving them instructions. He stood with his thick legs wide apart, feet solidly planted, a massive bear-like shape, gesturing as he talked and ate. He swung his arm in a wide circle, pointing to the hills and mountains. Foster was first to finish eating, and went immediately to one of the corrals, led two horses out of it and changed his gear and Brackner's to them. As they finished their meal, the other men also saddled fresh mounts. Then, with Brackner and Foster

in the lead, they all rode off along the road Neil had traveled yesterday morning as Chip Morris' prisoner. Once off the bench, they broke into a lope and rapidly grew vague in the misty drizzle. Watching closely, he saw them split when they came to the valley road. Brackner and two men turned south, while the other three swung a little to the north and continued on toward the river.

Now it was time to go. He rose and stamped the stiffness out of his legs. He went back to his horse, and then swung back up-grade into the heavier timber, crossed the trail and worked around to circle the V Slash bench.

IT WAS now about the middle of the afternoon. Anxiety had a tight hold on him, for he was sure that Paul Murray had been unable to induce Una to leave her store, and that Brackner was going there now. But even in that misty drizzle it would be suicide to follow the man directly, and getting himself wiped out would do no one any good. Una would be safe enough as long as it was daylight. She would not be caught napping, and her settler friends would be on hand promptly if Brackner should attempt any rough stuff. So the thing to do was to parallel Brackner's course down the valley without exposing himself. This was a hard decision to make, and a harder one to hold to, for it meant working along through the timber and foothills as he had done during the forenoon.

It was growing dusk when he came at last to the trail which had brought him into Tanque Valley that first day. He pushed along rapidly now, with the rain driving squarely into his face and the wind carrying the sound of the horse back instead of ahead. The shadows were tricky and his nerves rubbed raw, but he knew that if he could not see far, neither could anyone who might be watching this trail. He spurred his tiring horse to a lope with darkness overtaking him, dropping its thick veil between him and his destination.

All at once there was a ranker dampness in the air, and he slowed to a trot, knowing that the river was not far away. The trail bent around a clump of brush, and then he saw a light twinkling below him where the aspens made a black ribbon against the night. A sighing breath of relief went out of him, yet he did not entirely relax. He slowed to a walk, watching the bulk of the house and sheds, the shadowy outline of the corral take form ahead of him while the light grew into the shape of a window. This satisfied him that Una was there, that she had neither gone to Murray's ranch nor been disturbed as yet by Brackner.

"I'll take her over to the Trimbles," he told himself. "She'll be safer there till this is cleaned up."

He rode on at a walk now, a tired man on a tired horse. The window grew in size. A figure was silhouetted briefly against its yellow oblong, and a clear memory came back to him of that first night when, returning from the river, he's seen Una's slender form full length against the larger rectangle of the open door. His hand tightened on the rein, and for a long moment he sat there in the rain and darkness, staring at the small layout of house and sheds and corral.

Everything looked normal, but all at once he was nerved up again, tense and suspicious. There was a sort of sixth sense in him, which had served him too well at other times for him to ignore its warning now. He had ridden into one trap because he'd allowed his fear for Una's safety to override caution. He could not afford to make that mistake again. He pulled off the trail, circled through the brush and stopped again a short distance up the ridge. And now, suddenly, he was convinced that Brackner had beaten him here and was waiting for him to come. He dismounted, slipped out of the oversized slicker, and left it and his spurs with the horse.

THERE was a faint scent of woodsmoke in the damp air, along with the smell of wet sage and greasewood and the rank, fishy odor of the river. The river's steady mutter came to him and the wind whispered around the buildings and up along the ridge. He moved against the wind, coming down at a slight angle to the pole corral where the two horses munched

contentedly and paid no attention to him. He slid in behind the largest shed—the one Una had told him she meant to convert into her permanent store later on. Working around the end of it, he looked across and around the yard, alert for any hint of motion, searching the shadows for the shapes of lurking men. From this spot he had a full view of the back of the house. The kitchen window gleamed darkly in the rain. He stood there for a minute or two, considering this, wondering if he was mistaken. Everything seemed to be entirely as it should be. Una could be in the front room, working over the arrangement of her store. Perhap he was wasting time. If Brackner had not got here ahead of him after all, the sooner he found it out and took Una to a safer place, the better.

But he could not shake off the feeling that something was wrong, even though he neither heard nor saw anything to support the feeling. He started away from the shed, only to be halted at his first step by a thumping that began inside of it. Like the house, the shed was built of adobe bricks, but the flooor was dirt and the thumping sounded as if something heavy was being dropped onto the dirt at slow, irregular intervals. He backed swiftly up against the but the floor was dirt and the thumping continued. With a gun in his left hand, he edged along toward the front of the shed. When he reached the corner, he stopped, listening.

Inside the shed a man said: "Stop that, sweetheart! I'd hate to get rough with you!"

Neil's hair roots tingled, and the tingling raced along his spine. That was Gil Foster's voice. He had the picture now. A quick glance around the corner of the shed and another across the yard discovered no sign of anyone else. He went around the corner fast and along the front of the shed to the open door and halted there beside it with his back against the wall. He held a gun in his right hand now, too, at hip level. He lifted his left hand gun above his shoulder with the muzzle pointed at the sky. Inside the shed, Foster was talking in a soft voice.

"It won't do you a bit of good to wear yourself out bangin' your feet that way. Here, I'll just see if you've worked anything loose. This is a job I like!" He chuckled and went on, "You're built just right for a woman, sweetheart. Too bad you wouldn't be nice to me when you had the chance. I've had my eye on you for a long time. That's why I tipped off your old man how to find Mamie Martin. She was a nice dish, too, till she turned sour. If you'd been smart, I could of squared everything for both of us with Vic, an' we could of settled down— Ow! Damn you!"

A thud, a lighter thud, and then a sharp spat almost sent Neil through the door. Savagely he restrained the impulse. This had to be done carefully. It had to be done in cold blood, deliberately and without a slip.

"I'll remember that," Foster said. "An' if you start kickin' around again, I'll hogtie you so you'll choke if you wiggle!"

Muttering angrily, he came through the door past Neil, looking toward the house. Neil's uplifted gun whipped down and in. The long barrel drove under the yellow-haired man's hat brim, caught him just above the right ear. Although left-handed, the blow was struck with all the force Neil could put into it. Foster's knees buckled. Another quick blow struck solidly across the back of his neck. He plunged forward on his face.

SWAYING back against the shed's wall, Neil glanced alertly toward the house. The sounds of the blows and of Foster's fall seemed loud enough to have been heard in Silver Bell. He watched and waited for a long, tense moment. No sign came to indicate that anyone in the house or elsewhere had heard or meant to investigate. He thrust his left hand into the waistband of his levis and caught hold of one of Foster's ankles. He backed into the shed, dragging the unconscious man along with him.

It was pitch dark in there. He could see nothing at all. A scraping and a mumbling directed him to the rear corner at his right. He stumbled against the girl and backed off and knelt down, fumbling for her with his left hand, thrilling at the touch of her.

He located the ropes that bound her wrists and ankles, the gag that kept her from crying out. He pulled the gag off first. She gulped and sighed with relief.

"Quiet!" he murmured.

She leaned her head against him for an instant. He had a jackknife in the pocket of his levis. It was the right hand pocket, but he managed to get the knife out and open it. He cut her wrists loose.

"Take this," he murmured again, putting the knife into her hand. "Stay here while I look around. Get Foster's gun."

For another moment he knelt there close to her, with that familiar excited awareness of her stronger than it had ever been. He wished that he had brought the horse nearer. He wondered if he could manage to get one of her horses out of the corral and send her across the river while he finished this. It had to be finished now.

"Who else is here?" he asked, whispering.

Again she leaned against him, and he felt her trembling and put his arm around her. "Steady!" he breathed. "Steady! Just tell me how many's here."

"I don't know," she murmured. "They came while I was across the river. I didn't get all the way into the house before Gil brought me out here. But I saw Brackner —Chip Morris—Foster— I'm sorry— I—"

"Never mind," he said softly. "Wait here."

Her hands caught at him as he moved away. He did not stop moving. There was that stubborn toughness in him, that grim determination upon the first things that must come first. He pulled away from her and wheeled and went out again into the yard.

The wind swooped at him in sudden wildness and a downpour of rain slapped noisily upon the wet earth. The first thunder since last night rumbled over the Ceboletas, and the thought came to him that this might be the beginning of the storm's end. The beginning of the end for him, too. Ducking his head, he ran across the yard, with the noise and fury of the storm covering the sound of his running. He ran at an angle which brought him up the back of the house, close to the kitchen window. Here the force of the wind was broken. He backed up against the wall, catching his breath, his mind clicking with cool precision.

"Brackner's plan isn't to stop me outside," he thought. "He's counting on me coming back here, and he aims to make it certain. He wants me to walk in—where it's light and there's no room to dodge."

HIS LIPS were tight against his teeth. He was going in. The raging of the storm covered the slight sound he made easing open the door just enough for him to slide through. He closed it behind him. He stood there with a gun in each hand, his breath coming softly, his heart thumping against his ribs, his eyes on an inch-wide yellow band that lay against the far wall's darkness. This marked the location of the door into the front room. It had been drawn to but not latched, and it had swung inward that inch when he opened the outer door.

"Gettin' bad," said a thin, whining voice in the front room. "Mebbe that drifter won't show."

"He'll show," Brackner grunted.

"You seem mighty sure of him," Chip Morris said. "You an' him must of crossed trails before."

Brackner's reply, if he made one, was lost in a rumble of thunder. Lightning flashed across the sky. Rain hammered like shot upon the roof and against the river facing window. The wind was an eerie screeching. Neil catfooted across the kitchen toward that inch-wide band of yellow light.

"What're you aimin' to do with the girl, Vic?"

This was a voice Neil did not recognize. He paused near the door. Every nerve and instinct was drawn to a sharp focus, concentrated upon what lay beyond the door.

"Nothing," Brackner said gruffly. "When she sees Dixon hung an' her nester friends all pullin' out, she'll go too. Or mebbe she'll marry Paul Murray. He's been after her."

Chip chuckled dryly. "So has Gil."

"Gil's a fool," Brackner growled. "Al-

ways runnin' after some skirt. Murray's a fool, too, but if he marries that girl he'll take her off this land."

"Gil," said Chip, "might have other ideas."

Neil touched the door gently with the muzzle of the gun in his left hand. It swung an inch or two further into the front room. He saw the man whose voice he had not recognized, a man he'd seen at V-Slash. Gus, they'd called him. Gus was across the room, leaning against the wall at the right of the closed front door, lighting a cigarette. Neil shifted his position a little, looking for Chip. It had been Chip, he guessed, whose silhouette against the lighted window had nearly fooled him. Chip was a small man. A small man in a slicker—or perhaps a woman's coat—and without a hat, would do the trick. It's easy to see what you expect to see, and he'd been thinking of Una. But he could not locate Chip now. Instead, to the left of the door, in familiar bearlike stance, he saw Vic Brackner's burly form.

"Wish that feller'd show up," Gus grumbled, flipping his used match to the floor. "I'm plumb wore out."

Neil was rigid in the darkness behind that narrow opening. Unseen and unsuspected there, his right hand gun was leveled at a spot two inches above Brackner's belt buckle. His pulse pounded hard in his temples. His throat was dry. A cold tingling ran along his spine. A slight squeeze of the trigger would send a .45 slug tearing into the bulge of Brackner's broad belly. His hand was steady and his finger was snug against the trigger. He would have no more compunction over killing this man than over killing a rattlesnake. He would be amply justified in shooting without warning. But he wanted Brackner to know that he was about to die. He wanted Brackner to know who was killing him and why.

"Brackner! You an' your gunslicks—freeze! One move an' you get it right in the gut!"

"Dixon!" Brackner grunted.

The cigarette fell from Gus's mouth. Other than this, neither man moved or uttered a sound. A corner of Neil's mind wondered about Chip.

"Yeah!" he said. "Been expectin' me, haven't you? Listen! Tell Morris to line up next to Gus. Tell them both to shuck their irons. This is between you and me, Brackner!"

BRACKNER stood with his powerful legs well apart, but firmly planted, massive shoulders a trifle hunched, straining the fabric of his shirt. His broad, dark face glistened in the lamplight. He neither moved nor spoke. What was in his mind, he alone knew, but it seemed to absorb him utterly. Neil spoke impatiently.

"Tell 'em! Morris, get over there!"

Still Brackner did not move or speak. The only sound for a long moment was the howling of the wind and the spattering of the rain. Chip Morris was a nettle of worry in the corner of Neil's mind. But all at once he heard his own voice again, speaking with slow distinctness, with cold, hard emphasis driving each word through the pandemonium of wind and rain.

"Her name was Aileen Walden. She was coming back to Texas to marry me three years ago, Brackner. She and her brother, who was your partner in that Tombstone mining claim. You murdered them in cold blood, because half of the money you got for the claim wasn't enough. You murdered a defenseless girl, Brackner, and I'm going to kill you for it! You didn't give her a break, but I'll give you one and I'll still kill you! Nothing—"

A splintering crash sounded at the end of the room to his right. A wild, maniacal cry burst from Brackner's throat, and the burly murderer drew and fired at the narrow opening behind which Neil crouched. The bullet missed by an inch. A second bullet tore into the floor. In between them Neil's right hand gun had jumped. It jumped again as his left arm swung the door wide. Brackner's bulky form jerked back against the wall. Brackner bowed his head, seemed to stare down at the gun that had fallen from his hand, seemed to reach for the gun as he bent slowly forward. His heavy shoulders pulled him down until he lay with his broad, dark face pressed against the floor.

Neil's glance shifted swiftly. He slammed

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a shot at Gus as Gus dived headlong through the broken window at the end of the room, following Chip Morris into the stormy darkness. He backed and wheeled hastily against the kitchen wall. A moment later the outer door swung open and a flash of lightning gave brief illumination. He glimpsed the scrawny gunslick who had broken out through the window to come in behind him while he faced Brackner. They fired at the same instant. A burning sting stabbed at Neil's left thigh, flung him back against the wall. A choking breath came out of the darkness near the door.

"You win, drifter!" Chip Morris whispered. "Vic should of waited. I—" He coughed and sighed and thunder covered the sound of his fall.

Neil braced himself against the wall, gripping his guns, mindful of Gus. Outside the house there was a sudden pounding of hoofs, a yell, a gunshot. He leaped across the room, stumbling when his weight came down on his bullet-creased leg. As he reached the door lightning illumined the yard. He saw a rider going away, and Jake Trimble pulling to a stop. He saw Una, with a revolver in her hand, running toward him.

THE SUN climbed over the Cebolletas into a clearing sky the next morning. Neil, limping a little on his wounded leg, walked across the muddy yard to the corral and watched Jake Trimble saddle up to ride across the river.

"Soon as I've et," said Jake, "I'll carry the word around. Brackner, Foster an' Morris! Man, if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I wouldn't believe it!"

"There'll be some cleaning up to do," Neil warned him. "You settlers better make sure none of that V Slash outfit stays around. Keep your eye peeled for Ferron in particular."

"Once I get bead on him," Jake vowed grimly, "I'll attend to him." Then, tightening his cinch, he added in a different tone, "Better change your mind an' come along to breakfast. Ma an' the gals will be plumb provoked if I show up without you."

"I'll stay here," Neil said.

Jake gave him a curious glance, shrugged, mounted and rode off toward the crossing. Una was over at the Trimble homestead where, at his insistence, she had spent the night. Jake had taken her there and returned immediately to stand with him in case any of the V Slash crew might come in search of Brackner.

He heard Jake's horse go racking down to the river, and then the murmur of the river and the chirping of the birds became the only sounds. He leaned against the corral with the sun's warmth soaking into him. He moved his strained right arm carefully and eased his weight off his bullet-creased leg. He felt as if he'd been dragged at the end of a rope until every muscle and every bone in his body had its separate bruise. But worse than any physical hurt was the letdown feeling that came of knowing that Vic Brackner lay dead yonder in the shed beside Chip Morris and Gil Foster, whose neck had not withstood that second hard blow at the base of the skull last night. He had killed three men. None of them had deserved a better fate; he felt no remorse. But in killing Brackner he had reached the end of the long trail. The driving force that had motivated him for three long years no longer existed.

He rolled a cigarette and lighted it. He felt strangely empty, lacking even in the will to think, yet the thought of Una pressed upon him insistently. Wherever he looked he seemed to see her. Even when he closed his eyes he saw her. Nor was his vision haunted now by Aileen's shadowy face. He had discharged his obligation in full. He could do as he liked with the rest of his life. He was free to love another woman. But what had he to give a woman who dreamed of a store that would grow into a town?

"Find that other hill," he muttered, and shook his head, knowing that the lure of the endless trail was gone.

The cigarette went cold between his lips. He sighed tiredly and tossed it aside and drew his hand down across his face. As his hand fell Una rode around the corner

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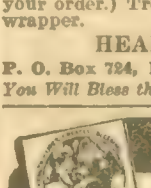

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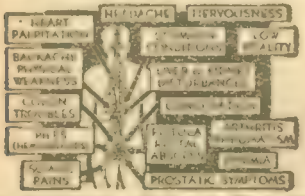

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of the house. He did not move. She slipped off her horse and came toward him, walking through the sunlight in that way she had that would live always in a man's memory, no matter where or how far he might ride. When she halted, near enough to touch him but not touching him, he saw the warm color in her lovely cheeks, the soft light in her dark eyes, the way her firm young breasts moved against the starched gingham of her dress.

"Neil," she said, "I was afraid you'd gone."

"It was in my mind," he acknowledged.

"Why, Neil?"

All the strong feeling he had for her swept over him in a sudden wave that sucked his breath away.

"You want a steady man," he said. "A man to work in your store and help you build a town. I can't do that, Una."

She moved her head slightly from side to side. "I know," she murmured. "You are what you are. I would not change you, Neil. All I ask—" Her cheeks suddenly were crimson, her eyes no longer met his.

He searched deep within himself. This was the test. He had to be sure. The answer came to him slowly, and then with a sudden rush of eagerness that cleansed his mind of the doubts that had cluttered his thinking. With awe and tenderness he drew her into his arms, feeling her tremble in his arms, feeling the warmth and sweetness of her sink into him.

"A long time ago," he said huskily, "I had a dream, too. I lost it, but now I've found it again. There's no store in it, and no town. But if you'll share it with me, Una, I'll make it come true for both of us. A ranch—here in Tanque Valley. Would you give up your dream for that, Una?"

She pushed with her hands against his chest, leaning back, looking up at him in a strange way. "Why, Neil?"

Now he did not hesitate with the answer, for he was sure. "Because I love you," he murmured.

Her lips parted with her breath and there was no longer any pressure with her hands against him. "Neil—that's all I ask!"

(The End)

OUT OF THE CHUTES

JUDGING from his performance at Denver, we'd say that the most likely candidate to fill the high-flying shoes of Midnight and Five Minutes to Midnight is a bucker named Squaw Man. Like his predecessors, Squaw Man is owned by Verne Elliott, who's not yet ready to commit himself with comparisons to those famous old-timers, but he claims that Squaw Man is "easily the best horse in the country right now."

Best for rodeo maybe, best for spectators who like to see performers sail through the air, but certainly not best for the cowboys. At Denver Squaw Man left the chutes four times with a rider aboard, and four times he left the arena riderless. Among those whom he tossed was Doug Linderman, youngest of the famous rodeo family, and thereby deprived Doug of his chance for prize money on the second go-round.

Next buckingest was T. Joe, but Chuck Sheppard proved he could be ridden—with experience. Chuck lost an argument with T. Joe at El Paso, Tex., two years ago, but he learned enough about the bronc to stick on the first go-round and take day money.

It was quite a show at Denver. Nearly 300 cowboys were on hand, and there was about $30,000 to split up. That could come to 100 bucks apiece, but most of it went to about 25 top-hands, with Bill Linderman and Sonny Edwards the individual leaders.

As we went to press, Bud Linderman was in line for the steer-wrestling final money with an average of 15.9 seconds, although Barney Willis almost set a record by dogging his bull at one performance in 5.3. Chuck Sheppard had the calf-roping event pretty well tied up, but other contests were still in doubt.

The 1948 season is really getting under way. Plans have been made in El Paso, Tex., for a bigger and better show. About 200 cowboys will compete, which is 80 more than have ever turned up there before. El Paso fans will get a look at Todd Whatley, the champion all-around cowboy of the Rodeo Cowboy Association. He and Toots Mansfield, Homer Pettigrew and Zeno Ferris were among the early entries.

From March 12 to 21, Tulsa, Okla., is putting on their annual stock show and

Brahma, looking for trouble

rodeo. The country's best top-hands are likely to meet there, too, in as much as there'll be purses totaling over $25,000. Also included at each of the 14 performances will be a cutting horse contest and a calf scramble. The latter, if you don't know, is not open to professionals. It gives a boy a chance to win a feeder beef. All he's got to do is catch one.

The Tulsa show is another for which Verne Elliott supplies the stock. And he's not one to stint. There'll be 125 bucking horses, 100 roping calves, 60 bulldogging steers and 70 wild-riding bulls. By that time the top-hands will know what they're up against, but maybe the broncs and the bulls will have gotten arena-wise, too. Anyway, the dust and the hoofs—and the cowboys—are bound to fly in all directions.

Adios,

THE EDITORS

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Trailing Horse Herds

(Continued from page 96)

Pretty soon he met some soldiers and Indians. They told him that a badman had had a horse shot from under him the day before. He had stolen horses from Indians in the Territory. McWhorter reported the man he had seen. The Indians and soldiers kept the scrub oak surrounded until the man came out. Why he did not crawl out in the night, nobody could imagine. He proved to be a half-breed companion of the badman, who had unhorsed his helper and escaped. It was these Indians, with soldiers, trailing their own stolen horses, who had stampeded Ed McWhorter's herd.

It was easier to drive horses than cattle, when all went well. They could be turned loose at night with little danger of their running or drifting away—if a suitable range were selected. They would graze and sleep all night and the next morning be found within two or three miles of camp. To try to herd them regularly meant trouble; not to have to herd them meant good sleep for the hands.

George Talley, who used to be on the King Ranch, told me about an experience with Indians while driving horses. In the early Eighties he and a partner were taking 600 head up the trail. When they got to the Canadian River, they found Indians demanding $500 for the right to pass. The Texans could have driven around, but it would have meant a wide detour going through rough, brushy country. Finally, the Indians offered to allow the herd to pass for a nice young mule they pointed out. Talley offered them a mare. No, they would take nothing less than the mule. Talley prepared to cross. The chief prepared to rope the mule. Talley told the chief if he roped that mule he would rope him. The Indian scoffed and coiled his rope, while his braves drove the horses by. The mule came along; the Indian cast his rope. When he did, Talley's lariat sang in the air, and the next thing the Indian knew he was upside down in the dirt.

He got up, walked over to Talley, put his hand on Talley's shoulder, and said: "You brave man. You William Tell."

EDITOR'S NOTE: This page is composed of original cartoons, verse or prose pertaining to the West and written by amateurs only. For each contribution published we pay $2.00, and more than one contribution may be submitted by any person. Each contribution MUST be the original work of the person submitting it. Address: The Amateur Page, Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York 22, N. Y. No submissions will be returned nor can we enter into correspondence about them.

Three Room-Mates

THE coon-tail rattler
Is poison and foul
He makes his home with
The gopher and owl.

While the gopher sleeps
The snake prowls around;
The owl keeps watch by
Their hole in the ground.

They never quarrel
Or even get cross,
Just simply because
The snake is the boss!

Karl Lovett, Mesa, Ariz.

Go West, Young Man

GO WEST, young man, they said to me,
Go out there where the land is free.
Get you a pony and a plow,
Pick up a few hogs and maybe a cow.
Get you some chickens and rabbits, too,
Then go to work like other folks do.

So I headed out West to the free country,
But I found, on inspection, it wasn't for me.
The land that I found was high on a hill,
It was in litigation, on account of no will.
I looked it all over and made up my mind,
I'm heading back East, with the West far behind.

L. C. McKennon, Three Forks, Mont.

Springtime on the Prairie

SPRING has returned to the grasslands
Where softly the snows have lain.
Seasoning deep in the earth-bed
Was left by the storms and rain.

Faint green has tinted the hollows,
Where nightly the warm herd lay.
Into this lush, springy carpet
Are woven flowers of May.

Soon cattle will be grazing
Where the yipping cowboys ride,
And each patient dogie mother
Will have a new one by her side.

Spring has returned to the grasslands
'Neath the arching bowl of blue,
Now sweet blooms scent the breezes
And birds sing the whole day through.

Georgia A. Stough, Trinidad, Colo.

Old Alec

OLD ALEC, weathered symbol of the West,
Your crinkled face and hair of silver grey,
Your skill that's met and conquered many a test
Remind me of an all too vanishing day;

When men rode hard and fast and long,
Enraptured by the wild and beckoning land,
While in their hearts and on their lips a song
Knit firm together the bold, venturous band.

Old Alec, do you miss the coyote's call?
Would you turn back the pages of the years,
And live and love throughout them, one and all,
And feel again their laughter and their tears?

You shake your head, Old Alec, and that's right!
In you, and in your kind, there yet lives still
The old-time glory, and the mystic sight
That looks into the future with a will!

Bill Fletcher, Lincoln, Nebr.

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 20 years Our Air Mail has been running between reader and reader of Ranch Romances, making for them new friends in near and far-off places. Any reader may write directly to anyone whose letter is printed in this department provided he upholds the clean, wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. We ask you to refrain from using it as a medium for practical jokes and particularly not to sign your letters with other people's names.

Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York 22, N. Y.

An Interesting Job

Dear Editor:

We are two girls, each 19, who would like to make new friends. We spend much time outdoors—camping and sailing in small boats and canoes, visiting logging camps, seal rookeries, canneries and Indian villages. We are laboratory assistants and students on the staff of a biological boat and enjoy our work in marine biology and in cancer research very much. Our laboratory problems and field trips are fascinating. However, we are often away at sea or in isolated localities and sometimes it is a little lonesome. So we'd both like to have people write.

JULIA HAMILTON
SUSAN S. JORGENSON

Fisheries Research "B"
Steveston, B. C.
Canada

Philatetic Plea

Dear Editor:

Have you room for a stamp collector? I'm 30, a freight truck driver and mechanic. I want to hear from hundreds of collectors in every country of the world, and promise to see that every letter is answered. Also to the first letter from each different country, I will send a copy of our Post Office Department's book on all U. S. Stamps. I'm particularly anxious to contact collectors who'll send me first day covers when issued, in exchange for the same service from the USA. I'm a trader at heart.

CHARLES ANDREGG

6005 N. Hudson
Portland 3, Ore.

Lonely Englishman

Dear Editor:

I'm a young, intelligent, but rather lonely Englishman. I should like to hear from Americans, who want a pen friend abroad. I'm interested in almost everything.

ERIC LUMER

BM/FRVV
London, WC 1
England

From New Zealand

Dear Editor:

This is a request from a junior farmer and a hotel porter in New Zealand. We're both 18, with dark eyes, black hair, and of medium height. We like any kind of outdoor sports, and we'd like to exchange snap shots.

HENRY H. REIHANA
WILLIAM PEHI

Taheke
Hokianga
North Auckland, N. Z.

Dixie Lass

Dear Editor:

I wonder if you'd please consider a young Southern girl's anxiety to hear from other boys and girls of all races and nations. We have beautiful scenery in Dixie which I'll describe to my fullest ability. I'm 18, have brown hair, brown eyes and love outdoor sports. Please folks, I'll be waiting for your letters, from everywhere and anywhere.

ANN GUILBEAU

232 Jackson St.
Lafayette, La.

A Happy Bachelor

Dear Editor:

I'd like to hear from anyone with a sense of humor. I'm 43, still a happy bachelor, 5' 7", weigh 155, dark hair, hazel eyes. I've traveled some, once on a paid vacation with the 1st Marines, and we stopped off in Australia.

MICKEY DONOHUE

Gen. Del.
Erie, Pa.

From the Royal Canadian Air Force

Dear Editor:

I'm a lonely airman, 19, 5' 8" tall, weighing about 160 with hazel eyes and dark hair. I'm very fond of bowling and other sports. Come on, pen pals, give a flyer a lift.

L. A. C. HOWARD ROBERTSON

Joint Air School
R.C.A.F. Stn.
Rivers, Man.
Canada

A Country Boy

Dear Editor:

I'm 24, with red hair, blue-green eyes, weight 178, ruddy complexion, nickname: Hank. I play football when I can, and music is a great favorite, especially at night. Although my days are full, nights are lonely so far away from town, so if there are any who'd like to write to a country boy, I'll promise to answer their letters. The Army taught me one good lesson—that's getting mail. There were very few letters overseas—but still fewer here in the States.

BAIRD CHAMBLISS

RFD 2
Cave City, Ky.

Sailor's Wife

Dear Editor:

I'm the lonely wife of a service man, and while he's sailing the seven seas, serving our country, won't some of you pen pals from all countries write to me? My husband visits many countries, and some day he may visit yours. I have a 13-year-old son, in school now, and I travel a lot up and down the East coast to meet my hubby when he comes in. I collect all kinds of things, and I like to swap.

MARY LEE HAWKER

826 Grove St.
Danville, Va.

Help Wanted

Dear Editor:

WANTED: Pen pals, male or female, to write to a 28-year-old soldier, 6' 2½", 206 pounds, brown hair, blue-grey eyes, large ears, a broad pug nose. His general appearance is terrible (with pictures to prove it) but he sure can write nice letters. All applicants for this position must be between the ages of 10 and 100. He has an awfully nice typewriter that doesn't get enough exercise.

S/SGT. CHARLES J. ROYKA

Box 365
Roswell AAF
Roswell, N. M.

Help Offered

Dear Editor:

This is my second try, and I feel lucky this time. I'm a soldier with 6 years' service. I'm doing photography and like it very much, as it's been my life trade. I'll be glad to help anyone who has a photo problem, and I'll exchange photos, too. Would like especially to hear from servicemen and women.

CPL. WILFRED F. LAURE, RA-39342850
Co. B. 656 Engr. Topographic Bn.
Fort Lewis, Wash.

An Indian Girl

Dear Editor:

I'm an Indian girl and I live at Aiyansh, but I'm in the hospital now. My hobbies are making Indian rugs and other Indian things. I hope to hear from everybody.

HELEN ADAMS

Box 1248
Miller Bay Hospital
Prince Rupert, B. C.

A Mean Pen

Dear Editor:

I'm not a young chicken, not an old hen,
Just a gal in her 30's who can sling a mean pen.
So come on, you people, who crave a pen pal,
I'll answer 'em all from a guy or a gal.

Was raised on a ranch, grew up in the West,
Of all this old earth, I like it the best,
But whatever you think, wherever you are,
Come be my pen pal, from near and from far.

If you don't like my poem, just say, "Whoa!"
Or write me a letter telling me so.
I have other vices, a sense of humor not bad,
So please write me a letter and I'll be glad!

MARLENE WILSON

Apt. 684
137 East Lane
Vallejo, Calif.

From a Mining Camp

Dear Editor:

I live in a mining camp, and believe it or not, it's dull. I'm 12 years old, just over 4 feet tall and tip the scales at 84 pounds. I've been reading RANCH ROMANCES for three years already, and I love everything, especially the serials. My hobby is riding horses and collecting statues of horses. Please write, boys and girls.

NELLIE JOYCE SNEDDON

Butte Valley, Colo.

Three From Tennessee

Dear Editor:

We are three boys who'd give our last buck to keep you from raking our letter off your desk. We would like to hear from girls and boys, no matter what they do or look like, all over the world. That's a fact! We're 18 and 19, and we like horseback riding, swimming, hunting, fishing, football, baseball and almost any sport. Come on, write us very soon.

PAUL CONNOR

Box 702
Englewood, Tenn.

JAMES L. HOLDEN

Box 683
Englewood, Tenn.

CHARLES R. MAXWELL

Box 73
Englewood, Tenn.

Calling All Cowboys

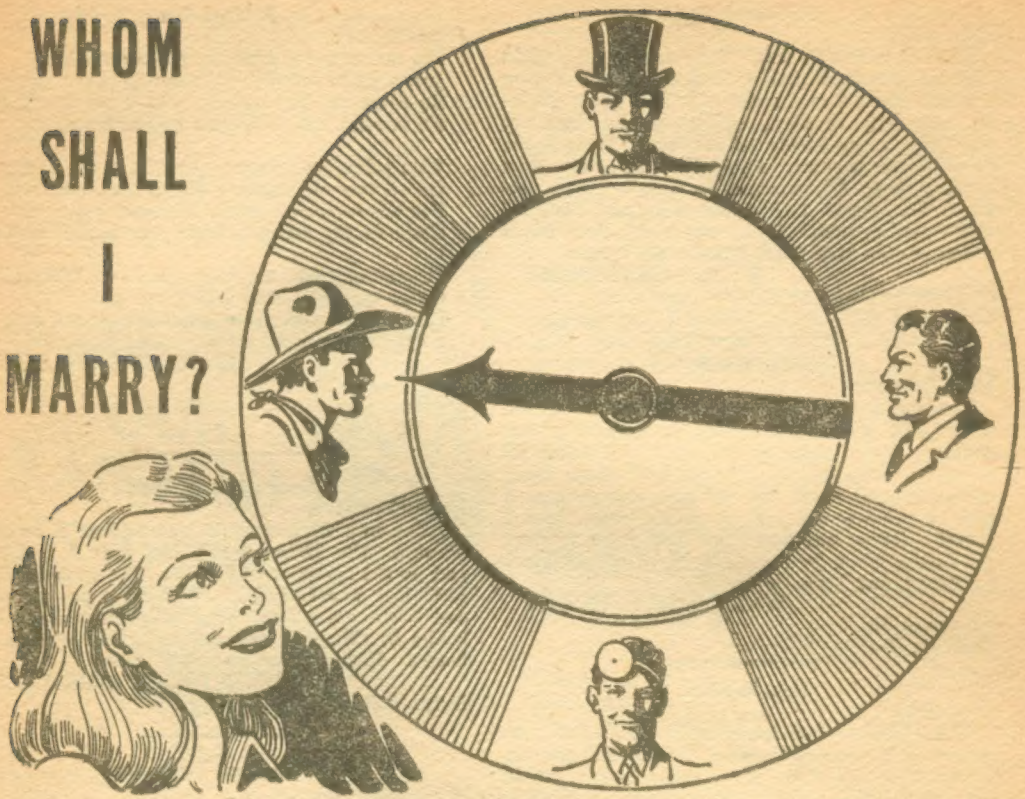
Dear Editor:

My pal, Patricia Peters, and I are in search of pen pals among the cowboys, so I hope you will help us. Patricia is 17 and I'm 18, and we both have dark hair and eyes, and we both like dancing and swimming, reading and corresponding. We can tell people who write us all about the distant land of India.

NICHOLETTE McLEOD

c/o Mr. A. S. McLeod
Guard N.S. Rly.
Nasik District
Nanmad
India

WHOM SHALL I MARRY?



By Professor Marcus Mari

Man of Aries — *March 22—April 21*

MEN BORN under the sign of Aries are generally conceded to have great advantages mentally. Their minds are active and versatile, and they can crowd three or four lifetimes into the space of one. They enjoy people, and like to talk to and associate with others. They are clever, quick, spontaneous. They have a sixth sense and are quickly aware of falsity, deceit, or any play-acting on the part of their dear ones. Don't try to fool an Aries man; he knows better.

They have a quick temper and no patience with injustice. They believe that every man everywhere has his place in the sun, and this charitable attitude toward all not only makes the Aries man popular, but makes his opinions valued and respected.

His adaptable mind makes him particularly useful in a changing world. He is constructive, and open to suggestions, often more concerned with the welfare and happiness of others than he is about himself.

The Aries man needs to train himself to be consistent, to pay no attention to his slight depressions, and curb his impatience with those who do not think as he does.

You may receive a personal reading by sending this coupon to Professor Mari, in care of Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York 22, N. Y. ENCLOSE STAMPED AND SELF-ADDRESSED ENVELOPE. (Canadian enclose 2 cents instead of stamps.)

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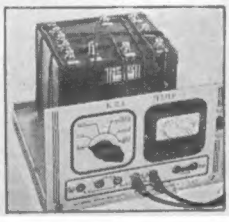

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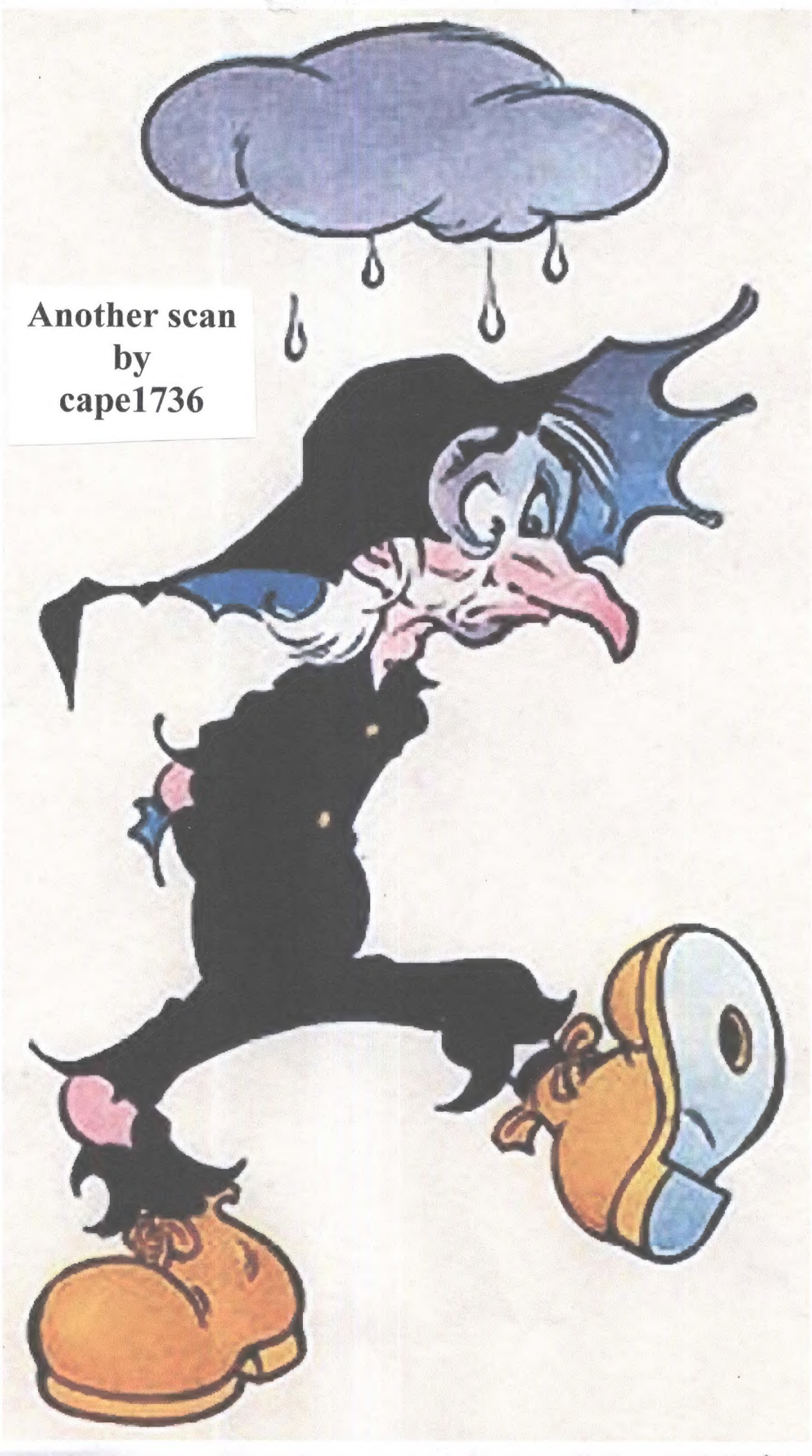
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